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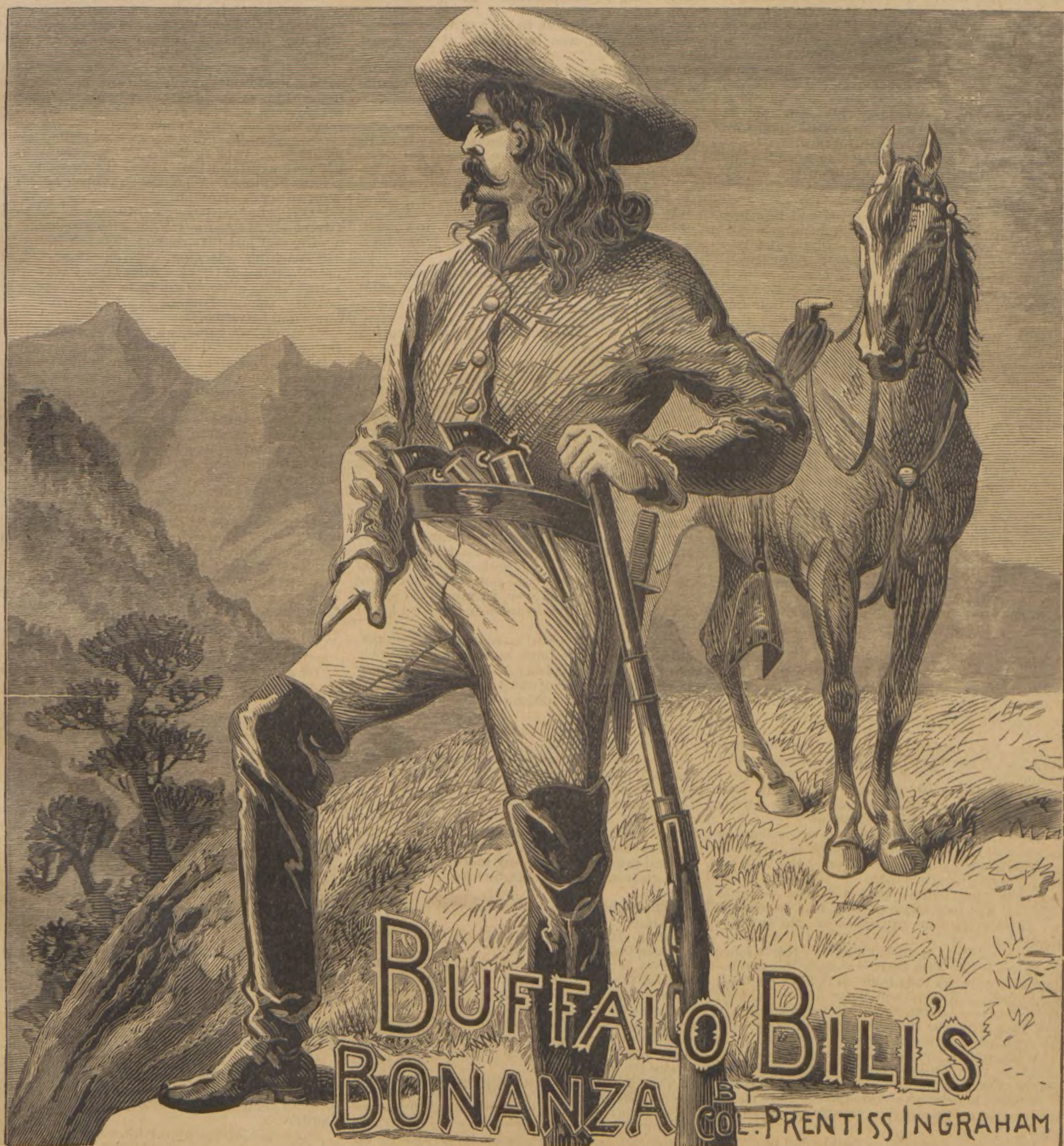
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BUFFALO BILL, UTTERLY FEARLESS, HAD DARED TO PENETRATE THESE BOUNDLESS SOLITUDES.

Buffalo Bill's Bonanza;

OR,

The Knights of the Silver Circle.

A Romance of Mystery in the Weird
Land of Montana.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAD TRAILER.

A MAN alone in a wilderness! No, not alone, for that ever truest friend of man among the brute creation, a horse, stands in the background, seemingly, like his master, enjoying the grand view of mountain, valley, river and plain that stretches before them in boundless solitude, mile upon mile, until the horizon of human vision is reached.

And in all that vast expanse not a house is visible, not a moving object meets the eye, not a column of smoke curling upward from hillside or valley to show that a human being dwells therein.

Only silence that is deathlike, only solitude that is awe-inspiring, only scenery that is weird in its grandeur, with only those two, the man and the horse, alone with Nature in all its silent and almost appalling beauty.

And who is it that has dared intrude into that vast solitude of the mountains of Montana, a land rich in weirdly beautiful landscapes, and wild histories of its early settlement written in human blood and sealed with human life?

It is a man of majestic presence, and who, though standing alone gazing about him upon nature whose forests are untouched by the destroying ax, its soil uncut by spade or plow, shows no sign of dread at his situation, no haunting fear that Death may come upon him there in a shape that he dare not meet.

Tall, broad-shouldered, erect as a soldier, he stands with his hands resting upon the muzzle of his repeating rifle, while his eyes roam with admiration over the vast expanse.

He is clad in buckskin leggings and hunting-jacket, top cavalry boots, a wide-brimmed sombrero of dove color, and about his waist is a belt containing a bowie and a pair of revolvers.

He stands upon the brow of a cliff, with a surging river two hundred feet below him, and which would receive his form did he take one step forward.

In the near background is his horse, a large, long-bodied bay, with clean limbs, an arching neck, and accoutered with a Mexican saddle and bridle, haversack, roll of blankets, saddle-blanket and one holster revolver.

The man is Buffalo Bill, the bold Scout of the Plains, and sheer love of adventure has made him penetrate far into that wild land, a score of years ago, when settlements and forts were few and far between, and that he might be able to tell his comrades about the camp-fires of this section of wonderland.

Strange stories had floated about the army camp-fires in that borderland, of gold mines in the Rocky Mountains, hidden away from all but a few daring spirits, of a score of bold pioneers who had settled in some Eden-like valley; and Buffalo Bill, young, handsome and utterly fearless, had dared to penetrate these boundless solitudes to see whether indeed men had boldly ventured life and all by invading this Weird Domain.

Mounted upon his splendid bay, his companion in many a long and deadly trail, he had ventured forth alone, giving to his comrades no limit as to how long he would remain away, and smiling grimly when they urged him not to go.

Thus days passed away and we find him standing in the very midst of the wilderness of mountains.

It is nearly sunset, and with the inborn love of nature in his soul, he stands gazing at the beautiful scenery upon every hand.

Not a fellow-being has he seen since leaving camp, and a struggle with a huge bear, an attack by a pack of hungry wolves, have been his only adventures, thus far.

He does not believe that a human being is within a hundred miles of him, and he dreads no danger that he cannot meet and bravely overcome.

"This solitude is so impressive—this silence so deep—I only wish there was some human being near to break the almost appalling charm," said Buffalo Bill, aloud, little dreaming that there was one human being near, one approaching him with the noiseless footfall of a tiger about to spring upon its prey.

A startled snort from his horse caused the scout to turn quickly, and his rifle was at a ready in an instant.

It was a man his eyes rested upon, and yet one who might at first glance hardly be taken for such.

A man, tall, powerful in build, clad in a garb of skins of wild beasts, and wearing upon his head an oddly-made cap of birds' feathers.

His feet were clad in moccasins of rudely-tanned leather, his neck was encircled by a necklace of grizzly-claws, and his arms were a huge knife in his belt, and an enormous bow with one arrow, long and sharp as a needle, set and covering the scout.

At the back of the man's belt were several quivers of lark, filled with half a score of arrows, each of a like pattern with the dangerous-looking one he held ready to let fly at the heart of Buffalo Bill.

The face of the man was a study, for it was brown as an Indian's, with the features visible above his long beard bold and determined, and yet wearing a look of settled woe.

His beard was iron-gray, as was his hair, and both were long and unkempt, while his eyes were almost fierce in their expression.

Buffalo Bill saw that the strange being had him covered, that before he could throw his rifle to his shoulder and pull trigger, the arrow could be let fly, and he noted that the hand that held the bow was as firm as steel.

Had it been a red-skin he had to face, or a dozen of them, he would have at once opened fire.

As it was, this was a white man, and one whom he had little dreamed of meeting in that wilderness of mountains.

His attitude, too, was hostile; yet the scout did not show the slightest feeling of dread, and said in his light-hearted way:

"Hello, old Rip Van Winkle, where did you spring from?"

The strange man eyed the scout fixedly, seemingly trying to stamp his face and form in his mind, and responded:

"You is Buffalo Bill, hain't yer?"

"So men call me; but, how is it you know me?"

"First, I know no other man w'u'd dar' come inter ther mountains alone; and next, I recalls yer from what I hes heard you was like."

"And who are you, may I ask?"

"I don't know," was the simple response, and the man lowered his bow, placing the arrow in his belt, ready for instant use, if need be.

Buffalo Bill at once slung his rifle at his back, and stepped toward the old man, while he asked in a kindly way:

"Don't you know who you are?"

"No, for I has forgot my name, and much else has gone from my mind, sin' I hev been roaming about these mountains."

"And what are you doing here, old man?"

"Lookin' fer a lost trail," was the calm reply.

"What trail?"

"The trail of a devil! the trail of an angel!" came the savage reply.

"Poor old man, you have indeed had a hard lot of it; but you will go with me, now I have found you, back to the fort and settlements, where friends will care for you," said Buffalo Bill, realizing that the old man was demented.

"Never!" came in a deep voice.

"You will not return with me?"

"Never! for did I not tell you I was looking for a lost trail?" he said petulantly.

"But you cannot find it?"

"I can, and I will!"

"See here, Buffalo Bill, I came into these mountains following a trail, two years ago, and I sunk down by the way sick and delirious."

"Why the wolves did not devour me, God only knows; but they did not, and after lying for days, raving with fever, I came to my senses once more, and tried to keep on the trail I had been following."

"But memory seemed to have gone from me, Buffalo Bill, and I have never found it since, though I have hunted day after day until, counting the moons as they came and went, twenty-four have I seen fill and wane, and yet I cannot find him."

"Find who?" asked the scout.

"The Devil."

The scout felt assured that the old man was insane, but how he got into that far-away land was a mystery, and he meant to solve it.

So he said:

"Well, I am trying to keep the devil off of my trail, and here you are trying to get on his, old man; but, never mind; you go with me, and he shall not trouble you any more?"

"I go from here and not find her?" he asked, fiercely.

"Find who?"

"Angel."

Buffalo Bill shook his head sadly, and seeing it, the old man said quickly:

"You thinks I am mad, Buffalo Bill, and I suppose that I am; but thar is method in my madness, fer I are s'archin' fer ther trail o' one I knows is a devil, though he be in ther form o' a man, and she whom he tuk away with him, stole from my home, are an angel ef God ever lows a leetle gal ter be a angil afore he takes 'em up ter heavin."

"Ah! Buffalo Bill, I am mad—yes, a poor old mad trailer in these mountains, but until I dies I'll never give up lookin' fer thet man, and some day I will find him and so deep will be my vengeance upon him thet my own lips will pray ter thet Mighty Chief up yonder ter hev mercy on thet poor wretch," and he spoke with a manner

that was majestic, while he pointed upward as he referred to God, as the Mighty Chief, in a way that was most impressive.

His words touched the scout deeply, for he, too, had begun to feel that, although the old trailer was mad, there was some mysterious method in his madness.

CHAPTER II.

THE FATAL SHOT.

THREE years before the strange meeting of Buffalo Bill and the Mad Trailer in the mountains of Montana, a man was riding slowly along through the Rocky Mountains, following an indistinct trail that led across the valley.

He was a person of fine appearance, with long black hair and beard, and a face intelligent, handsome and fearless.

He was dressed in a much-worn suit, such as miners are wont to wear; his sombrero was in tatters, and his general appearance was that of one who had been a long time absent from camp.

Well-armed, with rifle and revolver, his weapons were rusty, and his saddle and bridle seemed to have had hard usage.

But his face wore a pleased expression, and he was singing in a loud tone a verse of "Home, Sweet Home."

"Ah, me! another twelve hours and I will be at home, and then no more poverty, no more toil, for I have that here which makes me a millionaire," and he tapped his breast lightly as he spoke.

"A poor charity-student a few years ago—so poor that beautiful Nellie, who married me because she loved me, was turned out of her home and the hearts of her kindred by her rich father."

"Well, we suffered together many a hardship as we made our way westward, to the cabin home of my dear old father, who also has known his sorrows, and came to the border to live away from those who had known him."

"Six months ago I left Nellie, telling her I would bring back to her a fortune, and I have kept my word, for here I have the proof that I possess millions," and again he tapped his heart with an air of triumph.

"Oh! what a struggle life has been since twelve years ago I left Yale, with an education, a wife, and just fifty dollars to begin life with!"

"Teaching, clerking, driving stage and almost begging at times, I fought my way westward, Nellie clinging nobly to me through all poverty, though I urged her to return to her home and leave me."

"On, on we came, and at last reached my father's humble cabin home."

"Then I became, like him, a hunter, a trapper, a guide, and last, I went to the mines, for I had a presentiment I should strike it rich some day—and I have!"

"I knew there was wealth back yonder in the mountains, and I ventured there."

"Six months have I been gone from my wife and our beautiful child, and right glad will they be to meet me."

"And how quickly we will go Eastward, and carry dear old father with us, and our home shall be a palace so that those who cast Nellie out of their hearts for marrying the charity-student will die of envy."

"Ha! ha! ha! how happy I am with the prospect before me!" and once more he broke out in song, his fine voice rising and falling in pathetic cadence as the words fell from his lips:

"Tis a sound that is wafted across the troubled wave,

'Tis a sound that is heard along the shore;

'Tis a dirge that is murmured around the lowly grave—

Oh! Hard Times come again no more.

'Tis the song, the sigh of the weary,

Oh, Hard Times come again no more,

Many days have you lingered around my cabin door,

Oh, Hard Times come again no more."

It seemed to be a prayer in song, welling up from his heart, and he sung the plaintive air with the deepest of feeling.

Suddenly, as the last words left his lips, there came a puff of smoke from a small thicket on one side, a crack of a rifle followed, and the horseman reeled in his saddle, clutched at the air and fell to the ground heavily, while his startled horse bounded away for a few rods and then turning about, trotted back to the side of his prostrate master, giving a low, sympathetic neigh as he did so.

At the same moment a man sprung out of the thicket from whence had come the shot, and, rifle in hand, approached the form his deadly aim had laid low.

He was a man of perhaps thirty-five, his face bearded, his hair long and with a sinister, reckless look upon his darkly-bronzed face.

He was clad in a miner's costume, but looked more neat than the ordinary run of men of his class, while his face and manner bore indications of refinement not often seen upon that wild border.

Approaching the man who, a moment before, had been so full of hope and joy, he saw that he was alive, yet without doubt fatally wounded.

The wounded man started as his eyes met those that gazed down upon him, and he said hoarsely:

"Carter Creighton, it is you?"

"Yes, Roy Ripley, you have almost as good a memory as I, for it has been over twelve years since last you saw me," responded the assassin, coolly.

"Yes, and you have kept your vow, that you would have revenge upon me for marrying your Cousin Nellie?"

"Yes, I loved her with all my soul, and she threw me aside for you, gave up wealth for poverty, and became your wife.

"She has suffered bitterly, and she has made my life a curse, for I became reckless, was expelled from college, went from bad to worse until I became a gambler, and then drifted out here to the mines.

"One day I shot a young fellow over a game of cards, and his friends wished to give him a decent burial, so one went after an old trapper, who lived some distance from the mining-camps, and who, it was said, had been a clergyman.

"He came, and seeing him I thought of you, somehow, though his hair and beard were gray, and he was dressed in buckskin, and I recalled how your father had been an Episcopal clergyman in a Virginia village, and had, one night, in self-defense, taken the life of a human being, and which had so weighed upon him that he had come to the far West to live away from those who had known him.

"He had preached in the camps, where no one knew him, nor the sorrow that bowed him down: and he devoted himself to trapping, living in a cabin, he told me, with his little family.

"They called him the Trapper Parson, and he said that his name was Ripley, and that he had been a clergyman, and then I knew that he was your father.

"Well, he buried the young man I killed, and returned to his home.

"But, I trailed him back, saw Nellie, your wife, and your daughter Rose, though they did not see me.

"By inquiry at a settler's house some miles away, I learned that you had gone on a prospecting tour in the mountains after gold.

"I knew you would be successful, for I, too, had believed there was gold where you had gone, and I determined then upon my revenge.

"I camped on your trail, the one I knew you must come, and I have waited long for your coming; but you lie there at my feet, Roy Ripley, and my revenge is complete."

The man had spoken in the calmest manner possible, his face full of hatred and triumph commingled.

The dying man had breathed heavily, but uttered no word, while his eyes were fixed upon the face of his foe.

As the assassin ceased speaking, he said, in a voice that was getting husky with the approach of death:

"Carter Creighton, you have had your revenge, so now do one act for a dying man, as you hope for God's mercy hereafter."

"What would you have me do?"

"You were right in supposing I would be successful, for I have found a fortune in mines in the mountains."

"You went alone?" asked the assassin quickly.

"Yes."

"And you alone know of these mines?"

"No one else, and I was happy in the thought of giving riches and joy to those I love, when your bullet awoke me from my dreaming."

"I too had rude awakenings in the past, Roy Ripley, through you."

"Bring not up your revengeful feelings again, for see you not that I am dying? What sorrow you had through me is more than avenged."

"Now let me beg of you to do what I ask!"

"Well?"

"Will you grant my dying request?"

"Yes."

"You swear it?"

"I do."

"By your hope of heaven?"

"I do."

"In my pocket here is a map of the region where lie those mines, and the way to reach there, which is most necessary, for without the trail well marked out no one would ever find them.

"When I am dead take this map and papers to my wife, and tell her it is my legacy to her and to our darling Rose, and say to my father that I make him their guardian, and to see that they get the riches I have found."

"Do you understand, Carter Creighton?"

"Every word."

"Then may Heaven deal with you as you act toward them, and obey the wishes of a dying man, one whom your own hand shot down."

The voice had suddenly become strong, and the eyes seemed to blaze with the intensity of feeling that was felt by the man who lay prone upon the ground, and his slayer turned away from their soul-reading glance and shuddered.

When he again looked upon the form at his feet, his eyes fell upon the face of the dead.

At the same moment he heard the clatter of hoofs, and gazing up quickly, cried:

"By Heaven! it is the Parson Trapper himself!"

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAPPER PARSON.

THE one whom the assassin had seen coming toward him, dashing suddenly out of a clump of timber that bordered a small river running through the valley, was a man strangely like the one who lay dead at the feet of the one who had slain him.

A man of fifty-five he looked, though his long flowing hair and beard turning gray, gave him the appearance of a patriarch.

His was a kindly face, sunburnt, rugged and full of intelligence, though with a certain look of sorrow that seemed indelibly stamped upon his features.

He was armed with a rifle of ancient pattern, a revolver and a hunting-knife, and even to his moccasined feet was clad in buckskin, while his head was surmounted with a cap made of wolf-skin.

His horse was thin, wiry, and, like his master, was evidently well along in years.

It was the Trapper Parson, and he had been riding along a distant ridge, when his eyes had fallen upon a horseman in the valley.

Instantly he had taken from its case an old-fashioned spy-glass and fixed it upon the stranger, who was fully a mile distant.

"It is my son, if my old eyes do not deceive me!" he cried in a voice that rung with gladness, and wiping the glass carefully he again turned it upon the horseman.

As he did so he beheld a white puff of smoke come out of a thicket, he saw the arms of the rider wave wildly, and then the horse dash away, as his master fell from the saddle.

"God have mercy!" came through his shut lips, and he brushed his eyes, as though he could not believe his own sight, and once more turned his glass upon the spot in the valley where a strange tragedy had suddenly flashed before his vision.

There lay the rider, and his horse had returned to his side, while a man was visible calmly walking toward the spot.

It was then no hallucination, but a deadly reality, and quickly he urged his horse down the hillside, across the plain toward the river, and reaching it, into the flowing waters.

Across the stream his true horse swam, up the other bank he struggled, then, out of the timber into the open plain he dashed, straight toward the spot where one man lay dead, another, his slayer, stood over him.

The face of the Parson Trapper was livid, the kindly expression was gone, and there dwelt upon every feature a look of stern resolve.

The murderer saw him coming, and recognized the old clergyman who had once buried a victim of his deadly aim, knew him as the father of the man he had just slain.

How should he meet him? Could he lie to him about the death of his son, saying he had found him there dying?

Should he meet the Trapper Parson as his foe, and let the best man win?

He had to decide quickly upon his course, and one glance into that hard, stern, pallid face, and he knew that he must fight.

So he threw his rifle to his shoulder and cried in a sharp, commanding voice that many had known better than not to heed:

"Halt, old man, for this is not my work!"

"Assassin! you lie!" came back in stentorian tones.

"I say no! Halt or I will fire on you!" thundered the man, standing at bay.

"No, you killed him and it shall be your life or mine," cried the Parson Trapper, and he threw forward his revolver to fire.

As he did so the man at bay brought his rifle to his shoulder and pulled trigger.

There followed only a click.

"Curses! I forgot to reload after my shot!" he said savagely, and throwing the weapon down he drew a revolver; but, ere he could draw trigger the Parson Trapper fired, and Carter Creighton dropped in his tracks, the bullet leaving its mark over his temple.

But, unheeding him, the Parson Trapper threw himself from his horse and dropped on his knees by the body of his son.

"Oh Heaven, spare him! Speak, Roy, speak to me!"

It was pitiful to see the old man's grief as he bent over the motionless form, urging him to speak to him only one word.

"Ha! He is warm! He may not be dead, but unconscious, though his pulse seems not to beat, nor his heart to throb," and he dropped his ear down upon the broad breast.

"He may yet live! I will take him home, and if aught can bring him back to life, Nellie can."

Springing to his feet he led his son's horse near, and raising the body in his arms, with a wonderful exhibition of strength, he mounted with it, and calling to his own animal to follow he started off at a rapid gallop, wholly forgetting the man he had shot down but a moment before.

On, on he went through the valley, the strong horse keeping up his steady gallop, while behind came the Trapper Parson's animal close on his heels.

Miles were gone over, and at last, under the shelter of a distant ridge, a cabin appeared in view.

It was a large structure of several rooms, well built, had a homelike look, with its stable near, a cow grazing not far distant and scores of chickens feeding about, while a fenced-in patch down in the valley was a garden well cultivated.

A pleasant home, miles from the nearest neighbor, and a home in which peace and contentment reigned, and refinement held sway, even in that far frontier land.

Before the door was seated a woman, engaged in sewing upon a homespun dress, and a short distance from her sat a young girl with a book in her hand.

They were mother and daughter, and both were beautiful, the one possessing the matronly beauty that comes to woman after passing the threshold of thirty years, and the other the sparkling loveliness of early girlhood, for she was just entering her teens.

"Mamma, are you not afraid papa will never come back?" suddenly asked the girl, looking up from her book whereon her eyes had been resting yet not reading.

The mother started at the sudden question, and the tears welled up into her eyes; but, with an effort, she controlled her emotion and answered:

"My child, I know your father's indomitable will and pluck so well that I have every hope of his success.

"He said when he left us that he would bring back a fortune, and I almost feel sure he will meet with success, for he so deserves it, after all the struggles that he has met with thus far in life.

"Only think, Rose: your father is a college graduate, and fitted by birth and education to occupy a prominent position, and here he is in this wild land, struggling hard for a bare existence.

"Your grandfather was but a poor clergyman, with no means or ambition to push his son forward, and after his having taken life in self-defense, he seemed to feel that he had committed a crime that must drive him from his church, and he came here to live, becoming a hermit, as it were, for until we came his horse and his rifle seemed his only companions."

"I like it here, mother; but then I can hardly remember any other life, for I was but ten when he came.

"And then grandpapa has taught me to shoot a rifle as well as he does, and I can follow a trail like an Indian, and papa says I ride like a Texas cowboy, and I like these sports; but then you have taught me much, too, mamma, and for your sake I will study hard so as to be a lady, for if we get a fortune in the mines we will go back East, you said?"

"Yes, Rose, we would not remain here."

"And would grandpapa go too?"

"I hope so, though he seems to like the wild life he leads here; but see, is not that your grandfather coming?" and Mrs. Ripley pointed to a horseman who had just emerged from the woodland in the valley.

"Yes, mamma, and he is carrying something in his arms—it is a man, and he must be wounded."

Mrs. Ripley had also seen that the Trapper Parson was holding a form in his arms, and springing to the cabin door she took from a shelf a large field glass.

A moan escaped her lips as she leveled it upon the approaching horseman, and at the same time beheld a loose horse trot close up behind the ridden one.

"Rose, your father is wounded—perhaps dying—perhaps dead!"

She spoke in a disjointed way, and sunk back into her chair, while Rose bounded away like a deer to meet her grandfather and discover the truth.

"Oh, grandfather! it is papa, and he is dead," cried the girl, as she dashed up and met the old man and beheld the corpse-like face.

"He is dead, I fear, Rose; but spring upon my horse and ride with all speed to Powell's, and ask him to come here, for he was an army surgeon, and no man can do more than he can, if my poor son is not dead."

But Rose did not hear his last words, for already had she leaped, just as she was, into the saddle, and old Goliath, as the horse was called, had never been sent along at such a breakneck pace before in all his long experience in the mountains, not even when flying from pursuing Indians.

And on to the cabin rode the trapper, his face white and stern almost as the face of his dead son, while he would hope against hope that one little spark of life yet remained in the splendid form which Frank Powell could bring back into full flame once more.

As he approached, Mrs. Ripley shook off the emotion that nearly overpowered her, and rising, advanced toward the old man.

"Give him to me, father," she said, hoarsely,

and when the body slid down into her arms she held it firmly, kissing over and over again the cold face.

"You have come back to me, Roy, as you promised."

"You have come back to me, *dead!*" she said, in a voice that did not quiver, and then the trapper, who had dismounted, bore the body into the cabin and laid it upon the bed.

"I had hoped, my child, there was life still left, and so I sent Rose after Powell."

"Frank Powell's skill can do no good now, father; but how did it happen?"

"I saw him riding along the valley, and, as I recognized him through my glass, for I was a long way off, I saw a puff of smoke from a thicket, and he fell from his saddle."

The old man spoke in a low, calm voice, and the woman listened eagerly to each word; but as he concluded she cried:

"Murdered! he was murdered! then, sure as there be a God above, his murderer shall die for this cruel deed!"

Her voice rung like a trumpet, and she held her hands aloft, as she bent over the dead body, in an appeal to Heaven to hear her threat.

"My child, 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord, and already has his assassin fallen, for I was chosen as the instrument to carry out the law of 'a life for a life,' solemnly said the old man."

"And you killed the slayer of my husband and your son, father?"

"Yes, my poor child, I rode up on him as he stood by the side of my dead boy, and he leveled his rifle at me, but it did not go off, while my revolver did, and he fell in his tracks."

"Roy, Roy, can you hear? Your father has avenged you, Roy!" and the woman bent again over the dead form, while the old man turned away muttering to himself:

"Poor child, she rejoices in my poor revenge, while I, in my haste to find aid for Roy, forgot that I left a human being lying dead in the valley, to be torn limb from limb by wild beasts."

"Heaven forgive my act of justice in killing him; but I cannot be thus cruel to let him lie unburied."

"No, no, I cannot do that, and when Powell comes, I will ride back and bury him; yes, and over his dead body ask God to be merciful to him, a sinner, oh so vile! and to forgive me that I should have been forced to take his life."

"Ah! woe is me, that my hand should have twice taken the life of my fellow-man," and so saying, the old trapper went out to look after the comfort of the noble horse that had brought his double load so well, and then returned to the cabin, where he found the wife still bending over the body of her husband.

She had taken off his well-worn coat and put it tenderly away, and brushing back the glossy hair from his face, she was talking to him in a cooing, childish way, as she might have done to an infant.

In vain was it that the trapper tried to coax her away; she would remain, would talk in that meaningless way, until the truth dawned upon the old man, and staggering out of the cabin he groaned aloud:

"God have mercy! she has gone mad!"

CHAPTER IV.

DON, THE MONTE MAN.

MONTHS have passed away since Roy Ripley, the miner, returned to his cabin home in the valley—returned a dead man.

Like the wind had Rose ridden after Frank Powell, known in the camps and among the scattering settlements, as the Surgeon Scout, and the noble man had ridden at full speed at the appeal of the girl, leaving her far behind on her tired horse, while he pressed on to save life if in his power.

But one look told him that the miner was dead, one glance assured him that the loving wife had lost her reason from the shock, for her husband had been her earthly idol; for him she had given up a luxurious home, been cast off by her rich and aristocratic kindred, and struggled through life in poverty with him.

"It will kill her! she will die of a broken heart within six months," had Frank Powell said to a settler who had happened in, and they sought the Trapper Parson to tell him how closely she must be guarded, how tenderly she must be nursed.

But nowhere could the trapper be found, and for hours he was absent, until Frank Powell became most anxious for him, as the hours passed on toward midnight.

Then he suddenly glided into the cabin and motioned to the surgeon to come out.

"Doctor, I have been back to bury the man I shot, the man who killed my poor boy."

"I did not wish him to be torn to pieces by wolves, to lie unburied, and so I went to do my duty by the dead, forgetting what he was in life."

"Trapper, you are a noble man to do a deed like this," said the Surgeon Scout touched by the human nature in the old trapper.

"Doctor, I meant well by him; but let me tell you that he was not there."

"Yet you shot him?"

"Yes, for I saw him, from afar off, shoot down my boy from an ambush, and I brought upon him, as I believed, a just retribution, for he also would have killed me as I rode upon him."

"I saw him fall, saw my bullet cut into his head over his temple, and he fell in his tracks, while I, forgetting him, took my son in my arms before me on the saddle, and hastened home, hoping he was not dead, and that you might save him."

"But vain the hope, and duty called me back to bury that man; but lo! he had disappeared."

"I saw where he had lain, for the ground was reddened by his blood."

"I saw where he had ridden into the ambush, to wait for my son, where he had hitched his horse, and where he stood when he fired the fatal shot, and I tracked his footsteps, which seemed uncertain, wavering, from where he had lain, back to his horse."

"Then he rode to the river and dressed his wound, and thence away down the valley; but as night came on I started homeward again."

"This is a strange story, Trapper Ripley; but the fact is your bullet merely stunned the man."

"Yes, without doubt."

"Did you know the man?"

"It seemed to me that I had seen him before; but when or where I could not tell, and I only caught sight of his face as I rode upon him."

"Well, to-morrow we will bury your son, and then I will strike the trail of this assassin and see if I can follow it to the end, and if so, he shall answer to me for his red work that has fallen so bitterly upon you and poor little Rose."

Then Frank Powell told the old trapper how tenderly he must nurse the stricken wife, and he remained at the cabin until Roy Ripley was laid in his grave over in a little dell, and then, leaving a couple of kind-hearted settlers and their wives at the desolate home, the brave Surgeon Scout took up the trail of the assassin.

For several days he was gone, and then he returned to say that he had tracked the murderer far up in the mountains, and that he had seemed to be following the trail of Roy Ripley in coming home.

But there he had lost all trace, and, superb tracker that he was he was forced to give it up.

"And what think you, Doctor Powell, was his reason for following the trail left by my son?" asked the trapper.

"He doubtless believed that he had discovered a gold-mine and sought to track him back to it, having first taken his life."

"Yes, that was his motive, without doubt, and he has escaped a just retribution."

"Yes, for the present, Mr. Ripley; but, murder will out, and some day that man may be brought face to face with his deed."

"And what do you think of my sorrowing daughter, for she is as dear as though she were my own flesh and blood?"

And the old trapper sighed and eagerly awaited response.

"My dear Mr. Ripley, it is my duty to tell you the truth, and it were better that she should die than live on to suffer as a madwoman."

"The will of God be done! she must die, then?"

"Yes; and she cannot last very long, for she is breaking rapidly."

And the words of the Surgeon Scout proved but too true, for within a few weeks the loving wife, with heart broken, brain shattered, was laid by the side of the man whom she had so fondly loved.

And little Rose, with a heart full of grief, cheered up for her grandfather's sake, cheered him by song and pleasant words, went with him on his hunting trips and trapped and fished, riding ever by his side, carrying a rifle and revolver, and becoming an expert with both.

Nor did she neglect her studies, for she read to her grandfather in their leisure hours, and he helped her with her books and taught her much useful knowledge, young as she was.

Thus these two became wrapped up in each other and life really seemed worth the living to the old Hermit Parson.

One day, when out hunting together, the two were set upon by half a score mounted warriors.

The trapper, with his grandchild's life at stake fought with desperation, and Rose too stood at bay and shot down a huge brave who would have seized her in his arms to bear her off a captive.

But the Indians knew their strength, and were making a bold dash, when suddenly a horseman dashed upon the scene, a revolver flashing forth deadly music in either hand, and in terror the red-skins fled, leaving several of their number upon the field.

The gallant rescuer gave chase for a short distance and then returned to those who owed so much to him.

He was a man of perhaps thirty-five, remarkably well-preserved for his age, wore a long, drooping mustache, and possessed a face that was most attractive, as far as the perfection of manly beauty was concerned, while otherwise

it seemed a face to dread, so cynical was it, so reckless.

He was dressed in a style that was not common on the border, for his suit was dark-blue corduroy, of stylish cut, the jacket being short, and the pants stuck in the tops of cavalry boots, on the heels of which were a pair of silver spurs.

A sash was about his waist, and in this were thrust the silver-mounted revolvers which had done such good service against the Indians, along with a bowie-knife of rare workmanship.

He carried no rifle, but a lariat hung at the horn of his silver-bespangled Mexican saddle, and his general appearance, with his black sombrero, embroidered on the crown and rim, gave him the appearance of having come from the land beyond the Rio Grande, an appearance which his darkly-bronzed face and long black hair and mustache carried out.

His horse was a fine one, as black as night, and seemed to be in keeping with his reckless, handsome master.

In the fight the trapper had been wounded through the arm, but extending his hand to his rescuer as he rode back and joined them he said earnestly:

"Young man, you have saved the lives of my child and myself, and how to thank you I know not; but you will have your reward in some way."

"My dear sir, do not speak of my slight services, I beg you, for I did only my duty, as I heard firing and saw you set upon by these red devils, who were bold to venture inside of the chain of mining-camps and settlements," said the stranger, in an off-hand manner.

"But we thank you, sir, for your noble courage in coming to our aid," and Rose put out her little nut-brown hand and grasped that of the horseman, who gazed upon her child-like beauty with strange admiration, while he answered gallantly:

"To grasp your little hand, my sweet child, is worth the risk of many such lives as mine; but I see that your father is wounded, and, as I know something of medicine and surgery, I will care for him."

"Are you far from your home, sir?"

"Only a couple of miles, sir; and we will ride there in haste, for I feel a trifle weak now, and I will ask a neighbor to bury these unfortunate red-men."

"Let them rot, for they are not worthy of burial," said the stranger, harshly.

"Oh, sir, they are human beings like ourselves, though they are wild and cruel in their natures," said Rose, and seeing that he had made a mistake the stranger rejoined quickly:

"I was wrong, miss, and I will do penance for my words by returning and burying them myself, if their comrades, when we have gone, do not return and bear them off; but come, we must start now, as your father needs aid."

In less than half an hour they arrived at the cabin, and there the stranger skillfully dressed the wound of the old trapper, and promising to return for the night he mounted his horse and rode away to bury the dead Indians, the old man also making the request that he would do so.

At sunset he came back with the report that the red-skins had returned and carried off their dead, and then the three sat down to a most tempting supper which Rose had prepared for them.

"I have not the pleasure of knowin' yer name, pard," said the Trapper Parson, dropping into the dialect of the border, which he often used with seeming unconsciousness, though never in addressing his granddaughter.

"In the camps, sir, I am called 'The Don,' and also 'The Monté Man,' for my occupation, or say my profession, is that of a gambler."

The old trapper seemed deeply pained to hear this frank confession; but then he knew life on the frontier pretty well, and that there were brave men and true there who were gamblers and nothing else.

So he said nothing, and, as the stranger seemed to wish to give him no name, he called him simply Don, and Rose followed her grandfather's example.

From that day the Monté Man became a frequent visitor at the trapper's cabin, and both the old man and the young girl seemed to become greatly attached to him, and they told him of their sorrows in the past, and their simple lives in the present.

The Don dwelt over in the mining-camp of Saw Dust City, where the trapper was wont to go and buy his supplies each month, and on such occasions he heard of his rescuer as the most reckless man in the mines, and the boldest gambler, while he had taken life several times when pressed by his adversaries in a game of cards.

Still he was ever kind to Rose and himself, seeming to possess a second nature when visiting them, and the trapper was glad to have him come to his little home in the hills.

One day the trapper came home after a long hunt in the mountains.

He did not see Rose running out to meet him, as was her wont always, and he rode up to the cabin with an anxious face.

There his eyes fell upon a placard upon the door, and with pallid face and quivering voice he read aloud:

"Fourteen years ago, old man, your son, Roy Ripley, then a charity-student, stole from us Nellie Creighton the maiden that I hoped to have made my wife, and it wrecked my life and made me what I now am."

"The mills of the gods grind slowly, But the grist is exceeding fine," and so at last came my revenge.

"It was I who tracked Roy Ripley from the recesses of the mountains, where I felt assured that he had discovered a mine of vast worth."

"I headed him off, ambushed him, and he fell by my hand, while you nearly cost me my life, but, by mere chance, your bullet glanced, leaving an ugly scar, which you little dreamed that you had made, as I told you I had received it in a personal encounter in Mexico."

"But I did not die, and I went on the search for that mine; but in vain, and, disguising myself, I determined to find it by other means."

"Your son left a map of his mine and how to reach there, and you have never taken it from his coat-pocket; but I do so this day, and more, I take with me your grandchild, Roy Ripley and Nellie's daughter, and so my revenge will be complete, for one day she shall become my wife."

"Now, old man, for your son's sake I hate you, and leaving you to your sorrow and loneliness, I say farewell."

DON, THE MONTE MAN.

As though shot through the heart the old man fell upon the ground, and there he lay through the long hours of the night; but with the dawn he arose, and when another night fell he was far on his way to the mountains, following the trail of the Monté Man and his captive—following it with a vow registered in heaven that he would know no rest until he came face to face with the fiend who had so cruelly wronged him.

And he it was, white-haired, in tatters, with no firearms, his brain in a fever, his heart aching, whom Buffalo Bill, the scout, met two years after in his wanderings in the wild fastnesses of the Montana mountains, still hunting for the lost trail of the two whom he called the Devil and an Angel.

CHAPTER V. THE LOST TRAIL.

WHEN Buffalo Bill heard the words of the old man he felt sure that he was mad, and yet there seemed to be some powerful reason for his madness and his presence in that wild country.

The scout's kind heart was touched with compassion as he gazed upon the noble face and powerful form, and he determined to get from him just why he was there alone, in rags, with only a knife and bow and arrows as weapons.

He had heard strange stories of stranger mysteries that were connected with those mountains, and around the camp-fires of miners, scouts and soldiers tales were told of rich gold mines hidden away in the depths of the wilderness, while all who had sought to find them never returned again to civilization.

Old trappers had related how they had seen phantom miners gliding through the mountains, with pickax and spade upon their shoulders, and others stated that they had come upon camps, around which were the bones of human beings.

Filled with a desire to see this mysterious land for himself, to trace these strange stories to their source, Buffalo Bill had asked for an unlimited leave from the commander of the fort, and mounting Comrade, his best horse, and the fleetest on the border, it was said, he had gone forth alone.

He had not hurried his horse or himself, for he was amply stocked with ammunition and provisions, was prepared against the worst kind of weather, and meant to make the trip a holiday for himself, for there was no greater joy to the scout than in roaming over plain and mountain, alone with Nature, and facing dangers that might confront him.

He had been two days in the mountains, and was beginning to think that the tales told by the few hunters who had penetrated them were the offspring of a vivid imagination and superstition, when he found himself face to face with the old man who looked a veritable Rip Van Winkle.

"And so, after all, the mountains do hold a mystery?" muttered Buffalo Bill.

"The stories of phantom miners, of settlers who have dared to come here, have at least some foundation, for did most men, with the superstition ruling bordermen as it does sailors, behold this strange being, they would fly for their lives and protest that they had met the ghost of the Wandering Jew, or of old Rip Van Winkle, or the Devil himself."

"Now to see just why this old man is here, for if there is a trail to find, perhaps I can strike it."

So mused the scout, while the old tenant of the hills watched him closely.

"Come, old man, let us go into camp together, for it is getting toward nightfall," he said, kindly.

"Buffalo Bill, can I trust you?" he asked, in a whisper, looking about him as though he was fearful some one would hear him.

"With your life you can, Rip Van Winkle," was the frank response.

"Rip! Rip! You call me Rip, and it seems so strange, so familiar, for I believe my name was something like that; so call me Rip Van Winkle; it pleases me."

"I will, sir; but now let us hunt a camp."

"It was to my camp I was going to take you, Buffalo Bill, when I asked you if I could trust you."

"I'll not tell any one, Rip."

"Come, then!"

And the old man started off at a rapid pace, that seemed surprising for one of his years.

"I'll ride, old gentleman, for you get over ground like an antelope," called out the scout, springing into his saddle and following.

"I had a horse once, Old Goliath was his name, and she named him that, changing it from Job, which I had called him, as he was so patient, so good."

"I don't see that you need a horse, the way you go."

And the scout followed on after the old denizen of the wilderness who was going at a swinging trot, following the ridge back from the cliff where he had found Buffalo Bill standing, gazing out over the valley.

A half a mile brought them to a mass of piled-up rocks, which seemed to have been tossed up by some convulsion of nature out of the earth.

They apparently barred their way, but the old guide wound in among them, the scout following close, and soon they came to what looked like a bowl, at one time, evidently having the mouth of a crater in the mountain-top.

There was a spring of crystal water bubbling up in the center and falling back again, running off into a crevice in the rocks, while there were small trees around the edge of the basin and quantities of luxuriant grass.

On one side was a large cavern, and in a natural chimney-like crevice in the rocks a fire was burning brightly.

In the cave was a bed of skins, a couple of ragged blankets, while an old rifle and revolver hung upon the rocky wall, useless for want of ammunition.

But the strange old hermit did not seem to suffer on this account, as there was ample supply of game, smoked and fresh, hanging about the wall back in the cave.

Several bows, a quantity of arrows and a lariat of horse-hair with an old saddle and bridle completed the furnishing of the cave, which was large, comfortable and dry.

"This is my home, sir, and you are welcome," said the old man, with courtly grace.

His home! The abiding place of one who had at one time been a popular preacher in far-away Virginia!

The abiding place of one who had gone through college with honor, and, wishing his son to do the same, had sent him to Yale as a charity student:

The home of a man who had been forced to take human life to save his own, and whose sensitive nature caused him to shrink away, after it, from public gaze, and to find a retreat in the far West;

The cavern retreat of one who had been happy in his later years, by the coming to him of his son, with his wife and child, and who had seen that son die by the hand of an assassin, the wife die of a broken heart and maddened brain, and their child taken from him by one whom he had trusted—had taken to his cabin home only to find him to be a serpent to strike him with deadly blows.

"Was it a wonder, then, that the poor old man had followed the trail of the Monté Man to seek revenge and to get back his Wild Rose of the mountains, as he had called his lovely grandchild?"

Oh, no! and for two long weary years he had searched for that lost trail, hoping, vowing to find it.

And so Buffalo Bill found him, in rags, verging on madness, but strong as a lion, fearless and determined.

Gazing upon him in pity he read in that noble face a bitter history, and he said, in his kindly way:

"I thank you for your welcome to your home, sir, and some day I shall expect you to return my visit; but now, let me stake out my horse who seems anxious to get at that juicy grass, and then we'll have supper and talk over the lost trail."

The scout soon had Comrade free of saddle and bridle; then he brought from his haversack some coffee and provisions, for all the hermit had to eat was game.

"Come, Rip, that coffee will make a new man of you and clear the cobwebs from your brain, so that we can decide what is best to be done."

"But, don't you keep a hot fire for the weather?" he asked, moving back from the blaze.

"It is my habit, for the fire in the entrance to the cave I keep burning all the time, as it drives wild beasts off, and there are many of them in these mountains."

Buffalo Bill noticed that the hermit had dropped the border dialect and spoke as an educated man, and he became more and more interested in this strange dweller in the mountains.

After a hearty supper the two sat together in

the gathering darkness, and the scout said, to draw the hermit out:

"So you came here two years ago?"

"Yes, two long years ago."

"And where did you live before?"

The old man was silent, for some time, and passed his hand across his forehead over and over again, as though striving to master his memory.

Then he said:

"Buffalo Bill, my memory seems to be coming back to me now; I have met you before."

"So it seems to me; but I cannot place you, meeting you here, although I am not one to forget a face easily."

"You are the friend of Surgeon Frank Powell?"

"By Jove! you know Frank, then?"

"Oh yes, very well."

"Then you know one of Nature's noblest works, old man, for Frank Powell is truer than steel—steadfast to a friend, and surer than death itself, to a foe; but where did you know him?"

"You visited him at his cabin, near Saw Dust City, some years ago, and—"

"I place you, old man! You are the Trapper Parson that lived ten miles from Powell's, and we stopped one night and had supper with you."

"Yes, that is the only time I ever saw you, and it comes back to me now."

"You had your son, his wife, and their little daughter living with you, and we all had a happy evening, for they sung together, and I wondered how they could content themselves there in the wildest part of the West. But how is it I find you here, parson?"

"Call me Rip Van Winkle, please, and, like him, I may awake from the terrible sleep now upon me, and get back my child, to have one ray of sunshine ere life's fitful fever ends."

"I know my name now; it comes back to me like a dream of the past, and your coming, my friend, seems to have cleared the cobwebs from my brain."

"It was the coffee, Rip; I told you that it would. But, tell me, where are your son and his lovely wife and child?"

"All gone!"

"Dead?"

"Two are dead, the third is far worse than dead."

"Tell me all about it, sir, for I wish to know about you and yours."

The Hermit Parson was silent for a full minute or more, again passing his hand over his brow, as though to clear his thoughts, and then he began, and in a low, pathetic way, told Buffalo Bill the story of his life, of the lives of those who were so dear to him, ending with his pursuit of the Monté Man and his fair girl captive.

Not once did the scout speak, until he had heard the sad story, and then he said:

"Powell is no longer in the mines, as then, but gone up among the Indians, as a white chief, or I would ask him to aid me in this search for your lost trail; but, as it is, we must go it alone, Rip, or with such help as may come to hand, and I feel that if that man, whom you rightly called the Devil, is in these mountains, we can find him."

"Now tell me where you lost his trail?"

"In the valley below, at the river."

"How many days were you behind him?"

"Three."

"And you tracked him to the river?"

"Yes, near the head of the valley, where it comes down from the cliff above in a fall."

"I see; well, we can take up the trail there, if it is two years old."

"But have you dwelt here ever since?"

"Yes."

"All alone?"

"With my God, the birds and the wild beasts," was the impressive reply.

"And you have lived like a wild beast?"

"Yes; I have caught fish from the streams, trapped birds, and shot game, with my bow and arrow, which I made when I found my ammunition going."

"Poor old man! You have indeed suffered, and been truer to a trail than any one I ever heard of before."

"But have you seen no red-skins here?"

"Bill, one night I heard wild screams, and I ran to the lookout, where I saw you, for the sounds were going down the valley."

"It was dawn when I got there, and I beheld a sight I hope never to see again."

"A band of red-skins, a full hundred in number, were flying down the valley, urging their tired ponies on with all speed."

"There were women and children among them, and it was evidently some tribe that had drifted into the mountains to hunt, or perchance to dwell."

"Behind them came another band, but over a score in number, who were mounted on snow-white horses, and were clad in white robes; but they were Indians, with feathers and accouterments, only they appeared like ghosts, or phantoms, and it was no wonder the squaws and children screamed in fright, and the braves urged on their ponies in their flight."

"In silence, with no demonstration of attack,

these phantom warriors followed, until, as the dawn grew brighter, they wheeled their white steeds and in silence sped back the way they had come.

"I am not superstitious, Mr. Cody, but that sight impressed me."

"Did you not strike the trail?"

"Yes, and followed the Indian trail to where it had entered the mountains, gone into camp and then had fled."

"And the trail of the phantom warriors?"

"There was no trail!"

"Did you search for one?"

"Yes, thoroughly."

"All around the Indian camp?"

"Everywhere!"

"This is strange, and carries out stories I have heard."

"But I came here on a little hunt, and I'd just as soon trail ghosts as men or Indians, and we will begin where you lost it."

"I have beheld other strange sights here, Bill."

"The old man's as mad as a jack-rabbit; but I must humor him," thought Cody; while aloud he said:

"Let us hear all you have seen, Rip; but I'll wager you can't beat the Phantom Warriors."

CHAPTER VI.

THE "BLACK CANARY."

THERE are men who are born to greatness, and naturally find the highest pinnacle, while others have fame thrust upon them, whether they will or no.

Some are born to riches, and win wealth with little effort, while others get into the rut of poverty and never can get out, try they ever so hard.

Again are there those who are ever good through life, for many have never been tempted, and there are many who are naturally bad and naught else can be made out of them, while they blame the world in general for their acts, instead of themselves.

Such a person was Carter Creighton—a man born, it seemed, to be a villain.

A noble father, a loving mother, and with an ample inheritance, at the death of his parents, he yet seemed to begin the world wrong.

He was a handsome boy, but a bad one, and many a heartache did he cost his poor mother by the scrapes into which he got himself.

When but eighteen he ran away from home, it was said, to escape arrest for forgery; but rumor had it that his father paid back the amount of the forgeries, and so no effort was made to capture the wayward son.

Gossip had it, also, that a beautiful young girl, who was known to have loved him, in spite of his evil ways, had gone with him; but others there were who said she had left the little town where they had lived and gone to New York to seek work, for she had a step-mother at home that made her life wretched.

A year passed and Carter Creighton returned to his father's house.

He seemed a changed being, for he went to college, devoted himself to hard study, and not a word of complaint was made against him.

The cause of this remarkable metamorphosis, it was soon found, was a woman—a distant cousin of his, who had become an inmate of his father's family, having come to the town to finish her education.

Beautiful in face, perfect in form, and lovely in character, Nellie Creighton won the hearts of all, while her being an heiress was no drawback to the love of the youths who sought to win favor in her eyes.

One bleak winter day she met, while skating, a charity student, Roy Ripley.

She had fallen through the ice, and all fled, fearing that they too would go down—all but the charity student.

He plunged boldly in, and, upholding her in his strong arms, called for help.

At last it came and both were saved; but, had it not been for Roy Ripley the maiden would have drowned, and none knew it better than she.

And in her peril her cousin, her escort to the skating scene, Carter Creighton, had shrunk back.

She had seen him seem to stagger under the shock, cover his face with his hands, as though to shut out the fearful sight of the drowning girl, and stand quivering with emotion.

From that day there was a change in the feelings of Nellie Creighton toward her cousin.

She had defended him against calumny, and, though denying that they were lovers, at least on her part, for she was of his own age, she had at least shown great regard for him, and rumor had it that some day she would marry him.

But the meeting of Roy Ripley had changed her feelings, if she had had any of love, toward her cousin, and gossip soon had it that the charity student would win the heiress; and many were glad, for no truer man was there in the college.

At length the college term came to an end, and Roy Ripley carried off first honors, though Carter Creighton had striven hard to win.

And more, against the calculations and com-

mands of her parents and friends, Nellie Creighton had become the wife of the charity student, and the two had left the town to seek a home elsewhere.

Then did the real nature of Carter Creighton show itself again in its true light.

He had tried hard for the prize, Nellie and her fortune, and he had lost, and the old Adam broke out again; he became worse than ever before—so bad, in fact, that in disgrace he fled from his home.

After years of wandering, from bad to worse, he turned up in a miner's camp on the border.

With his years his beauty of face and form increased, for he was a remarkably handsome man, and his strength of limb, deadly aim with firearms, and skill at cards and recklessness increased in a like ratio, until he became known and feared far and wide.

Heavily-bearded and clad in a miner's suit he had been when the Trapper Parson had buried one of his victims, and in doing so had been recognized as the father of his successful rival, of whom he had lost all trace—Roy Ripley.

Then the venom in the nature of Carter Creighton broke out once more, and he determined upon revenge.

He dogged the old trapper back to his home, found there his rival and his wife, with their child, Wild Rose, and he at once plotted dire mischief.

When about to strike he found that Roy Ripley had suddenly disappeared, and through spies he learned that he had gone on a prospecting tour up in the Montana mountains.

"I camp on his trail and meet him on his return," he had said, and the reader knows how but too well he kept his word.

With his rival dead, and suffering from the wound given him by the Trapper Parson, the plotter had fled to the mountains to recover, but still to plot and plan his diabolical scheme.

In vain had he tried to find the trail of Roy back to his mine.

He had vowed to the man he had slain that he would give the map and papers to his wife and child.

It had been a false vow, for he meant to have all for himself.

Finding that the trail to the mine eluded his search, he tried another plot to get all.

The poor wife was dead, and the Trapper Parson had made no effort to go to the mine.

Did he know of its existence?

Had the papers been found or overlooked in the death of Roy Ripley and his wife?

Or, did the Trapper Parson care nothing for the wealth?

Such were the questions the man asked, and he determined to find out all.

So he went away for awhile, cut off his beard, leaving only a long drooping mustache; dressed as a Mexican sport, rigged out his horse as a *caballero's* steed and appeared in the mines as Don, the Monté Man.

His tricks at cards had not failed him, and he won money rapidly; but it was revenge and the mine he wanted.

One day chance favored him in the rescue of the Trapper Parson and Rose, as he was on the way to their cabin.

A frequent guest at the little cabin, professing friendship, he learned all that he would know, and that the papers left by Roy Ripley had never been taken from his pocket.

He could have secured those papers and none been the wiser; but no—his revenge would not have been complete thus, and so he determined to take the poor, innocent, trusting little Wild Rose of the mountain away with him.

He was perfecting his plans to have all his own way, when, one night, as he sat in the tavern of Saw Dust City waiting for the crowd to gather and the usual sport, gambling, to begin, the stage rolled up to the door, having just come from Helena.

Among the passengers was one evidently not a miner.

It was a woman, dressed in deep black, veiled heavily, and with a slender, graceful form.

She looked the lady, as far as outside appearances went, but what could she want in that wild place? was the query on every lip.

The Monté Man was interested at once.

He had always been the admiration of women, and he returned the compliment in a most liberal degree.

So he asked a miner whom he knew and had seen get out of the stage with her:

"Say, Dave, who is she?"

"Don, I dunno, but she are a beauty, and her voice are like sugar, it are so sweet."

"Where did she come from?"

"She lighted into Hel'na, while I were thar, comin' from somewhar, and ther landlord give her ther best room in ther lay-out, and Sunday night, as we was all gittin' ready ter play keards, she begun ter sing up in her room, whar she were sittin' in ther window, lookin' out on ther moonlight."

"Now, Don, I hes heerd singin' in my time, but I'm durned ef her voice didn't go right down inter what leetle soul I hes got left, and squeeze out o' it tears I didn't think was stored thar."

"Yes, she must be a great singer to make you

weep, Dave. Guess they were whisky tears," the Don suggested.

"Waal, they *was* tears, be they o' gin, whisky or water, pard, and thar was ther same kind in ther eyes o' ail thet rough gang."

"Why, ther fellers jist tuk off thar boots, so as not ter make a noise, and sneaked on tiptoe out under her winder an' listened to her singin' until thar war a audience o' two hundred thar. It were a pictur', pard."

"When she stopped we all held our breath, she fear wouldn't begin ag'in."

"Waal, thar we sot, until she, hevin' her eyes on ther moon, hadn't seen us afore, but doin' so, jumped up with a skeert leetle cry."

"Then we sent up word and axed her to sing, and she come down, so sweet like, and sot down on a cheer on ther piazzzy, while we camped out around her, and, Lordy! she jist beat a cage-full o' canaries all holler."

"Thar was no one wanted ter play keards thet night, and thar wa'n't a drink tuk at ther bar, 'ceptin' by an old soak, who has ter take it reg'lar, every half-hour, or die."

"He forgot it once, while she were singin', an' come near dyin', as he had a fit; but ther boys was a-hustlin' him off, when she come up and bathed his head, and he come round mighty quick."

"And she has come here?"

"Yas, Don."

"Who is she?"

"Dunno, as I said before."

"What name did she give at Helena?"

"Lordy, I dunno; but 'cause she war all in black, one o' ther fellers called her ther Black Canary, and thet's all ther name I knows."

Don got up and went to the landlord, and asked:

"Who is she, Bunco?"

As the new arrival was the only female in the house, Bunco understood who was meant, and answered:

"She told me her name was Clarice Creighton, and added thet ther boys had named her, in Hel'na, ther Black Canary; but what in thunder's ther matter, Don?" and Bunco, the landlord, sprung toward the gambler, as he saw him reel, for the Monté Man was his best customer in Saw Dust City.

"Guess I've been drinking too much, for my head swam around like a top. I'll go to my room," and the Don hastily departed for his quarters, which were in the "Sinner's Rest," as the tavern was most appropriately named.

In a little while he came out again, and calling the landlord aside, said quietly:

"Bunco, where is the Black Canary?"

"In her room, eating her supper; but as Dave and them as come up with her from Hel'na on the coach, hes been telling how she kin sing like a mocking-bird, the boys sent me ter ask her ef she would sing fer us ter-night, and she said as how she would ter please 'em."

"And she will sing where?"

"In ther bar, fer I explained to her we didn't hev no parlor, and ther dinin'-room wasn't large enough."

"Come up there, Don, and I'll interdoocce yer."

"Thank you, but I have got to go up to a mountain camp to-night to see a sick friend."

"But is she good-looking?"

"Pretty hain't no name, Don, though I would say as though she wasn't no chicken, bein' in ther neighborhood o' thirty, while her face are as sad as a graveyard at night."

"And you said her name was Clarice Creighton?"

"Yas, but whether it are miss or mistress I doesn't know, and thar is thet about her looks thet don't encourage me ter ask, while she carries two o' ther neatest leetle guns hung from her belt I ever seen."

"She carries revolvers then?"

"Two of 'em, an' it are my opinion that she has come out here on a gunning trip fer some feller, but your good looks oughter make her forget all about him, Don."

"Well, Bunco, here's some money, for I do not know exactly when I shall return, and I'll get you to keep the things in my room for me."

"I'll do it, Don; but I'm right down sorry you is goin' away."

"I must go," was the stern answer, and half an hour after the Monté Man rode away from the Sinner's Rest, while in his ears there rung out in sweetest melody the voice of the Black Canary, singing to the rude audience of miners that had gathered about her in breathless silence.

"Great God! that voice and that song will haunt me to my dying day!" cried the Monté Man, and driving his spurs deep he rode on like the wind along the moonlit trail, his fiendish plot against the Trapper Parson and his Wild Rose hastened by the coming to the Sinner's Rest of the mysterious woman known as the Black Canary.

CHAPTER VII.

LASOING A GHOST.

"BETTER tell me the rest of your ghost stories to-morrow, Rip, when the sun is shining, for I won't be able to sleep to-night if you give me another one like the Phantom Warriors," said

Buffalo Bill, as he saw that the Hermit Parson was anxious to unbosom himself further about the mysteries of the mountains, and he wished to discourage him, fearing it would excite his brain.

"Bill, I see that you do not believe what I have told you about those ghostly braves, and it is no wonder that you believe it to be a fantasy of my poor old diseased brain, for I hardly believed my own eyes.

"I do not say they were spirit braves, I only say what I saw, and the mystery is beyond me to fathom, and I will show to you strange sights in these hills."

There was that about the old man now that did not seem like madness, and fearing that he had wounded him by his words, the scout said:

"I have heard so many tales of what were seen here, that I ventured into these mountains to see for myself the cause.

"I do not believe any Indians dwell here, for they dread these hills as being full of evil spirits, as they say, though red-skins have told me that there were both very rich gold and silver mines here."

"There are, Buffalo Bill, and let me tell you a strange story about silver, which, to convince you that my tongue is not obeying the dictates of a wandering mind, let me give you ocular proof.

"See here!"

As he spoke he arose and took from a hiding-place in the rocks what appeared at first to be a ring of white metal.

Upon examining it closely, the scout saw that it was a *handcuff of silver*.

He was amazed, for it was heavy, solid, and seemed beaten out of the metal rather than skillfully manufactured.

Still there was no opening to it, and Buffalo Bill said:

"This is a silver circle, and solid at that."

"How strange that you should have named it, Bill, for look close and you will see rudely engraven there some words."

The scout looked and read aloud, in a slow, puzzled tone:

"The Silver Circle is broken by Death alone."

"This is very strange, and I am curious to know where you got it?"

"From the wrist of a dead man!"

"Indeed! and where?"

"On the very spot where I lost the trail of the Monté Man and my Wild Rose."

"Did you kill the man?"

"No, I found him there, torn almost to pieces by the wolves that I heard fighting over him."

"His horse lay near, his feet hopped, and he was also torn to pieces by the ravenous beasts, while his rider's clothing was in shreds, and it was buckskin. He had no weapons, no saddle or bridle, only this silver band encircling one arm."

"It would not come off over his hand without breaking the bones, which I did, and you can see that it was riveted on, so what does it mean?"

"I do not know, I am sure; but you say he had no saddle, bridle or weapons?"

"Nothing."

"Strange, very strange, and his horse was hopped?"

"Yes, but so that he could walk slowly. I buried the body, what was left of it, and brought that silver circle here."

"Another mystery to clear up," said the scout.

"And more, as though connecting the two, on a cliff rising out of the valley, painted with red clay, is a huge circle, while in it are the words:

"KNIGHTS OF THE SILVER CIRCLE.

UNBROKEN UNTIL DEATH."

"In the center is a pointing hand, and the object at which it points is a wolf squatting down upon the ground and his paw upon a human skull."

Bill eyed the old hermit a little anxiously, wondering if his mind was wandering again.

"And now, Bill, I have another strange thing to tell you."

"Well, Parson Van Winkle, I am open to hear anything to-night."

"You are becoming skeptical again."

"No; only more intensely interested in this mysterious country, and I am mighty glad I came."

"And so am I, for I feel that Heaven put it in your heart to come here to help me."

"I'll stick by you, parson, through all," earnestly said the scout.

"I know it, I feel it, and therefore I do not fear to tell you of facts that seem supernatural, and which might drive away any other man quickly from these hills in terror."

"I don't run from a sickly ghost half as soon as I do from a right healthy live man," said the scout.

"I believe you have no fear of aught in this world, Buffalo Bill; but, let me tell you another sight that I have seen here that was strange."

"You'll find me a good listener, Parson Rip."

"I have noticed trails here, now and then,

and always of one horse, so I took my position several months ago in a pile of rocks to see what would pass.

"I was there a couple of days, when one afternoon toward sunset I saw a horseman coming up the valley."

"He was too far off to be in range of my arrows, and I could not reach a place to head him off without his seeing me, so I determined to wait until he had passed and then follow him."

"But he rode toward a pile of rocks, dismounted, and hiding his horse from view, went on foot to a clump of several trees that grew close together directly upon the trail of the horse I had noticed."

"Watching him closely I saw him take his lariat and make it fast about the trunk of one of the trees and then stand out of view."

"I waited with deep surprise, when suddenly I heard the fall of hoofs."

"Turning in the direction of the sound I saw a horse coming at a canter up the valley."

"Nor was he alone, for at his side ran a huge dog, the largest I have ever seen, and at first I thought it was a bear."

"The horse was white, the dog perfectly black."

"I turned my spy-glass upon the dog and saw that he had what appeared to be a white collar about his neck."

"Then I looked at the horse and saw that he carried a pack, firmly strapped upon him, and looking like a pair of huge saddle-bags."

"But he cantered gayly along, not minding his load, while the dog ran by his side."

"So interested had I become in this strange pair of brutes that I had forgotten the man in ambush."

"Remembering him as the noble horse and dog approached the trees, I knew at once his object."

"He meant to lasso the horse."

"A moment more and they were near the ambush; the lariat shot out swiftly, and settling over the head of the horse just as he was getting out of reach, brought him down, while the man bounded out of his retreat toward him, giving a yell that echoed through the valley."

"But with a savage yelp the dog leaped upon the man, gripped his throat, and they fell together, but after a short struggle the brute arose, while the man remained motionless."

"Then the dog sprang at the lariat, seized it in his teeth, and in a very short while had freed his brute comrade, and away they scampered together, the dog barking loudly, the horse neighing wildly."

"Now, Cody, what does this mean?"

"I am sure I can offer no explanation; but the man—what of him?"

"I went to him as quickly as I could, but he was dead when I reached him."

"The dog had killed him?"

"Yes."

"And who and what was he?"

"A miner I had seen in Saw Dust City."

"He was armed with rifle and revolvers, and had some gold-dust with him; but I buried him there in the valley and brought his weapons and gold here with me—they are there on that rock shelf; but my old mind caused me to forget the horse until I was nearly home, and I went back for him. I was too late, for the wolves had already attacked him."

"And yet they never attack you?"

"It is strange; but then I walk by them with no show of fear, and when they dog my steps too close I send a few arrows into their midst to give them some of their own comrades to feed on, and I am not molested."

Buffalo Bill gazed in wonder at the strange old sojourner before him, and he made up his mind that, no matter how wandering had been his mind when he first met him, it was clear now, and that the stories he had told were true, strange as they were.

So he said:

"Well, to-morrow I'll take the trail with you and see what we can discover; but I am sorry you have no horse."

"I do not care for one, unless I could catch that white steed which I have seen several times since the miner attempted to capture him, and going and coming, always with his pack, and always accompanied by his dog companion."

Impressed by what he had heard, the scout brought his horse into the cavern, at the request of the Hermit Parson, to save him from the wolves, and rolling himself in his blankets, lay down to rest, leaving his strange companion seated before the fire gazing dreamily into the flames.

The next morning the two started out upon the search for the lost trail.

The trees where the man had stood, to lasso the mysterious white horse, were first sought, and there was his grave, there hung his bridle and saddle, where the Hermit Parson had placed them.

Then the cliff, with the sketch of the Silver Circle upon its rocky face, was visited, and long did the scout stand and ponder, striving to solve just what it meant.

The spot where the lost trail ended in the

stream, there where the track of the Monté Man had been obliterated, was closely examined, but, though they remained there until late in the afternoon, no solution could be arrived at as to where the trail went from there, for to enter the river would be to dash swiftly away upon the current.

"We'll come back to-morrow, parson, and arrange to camp right here," said Buffalo Bill, and, as the hermit would not ride, he mounted his horse and the two started upon their return to the mountain cave.

It was just nightfall when they reached the clump of trees, where was the grave of the miner, with his saddle and bridle hanging above him, and they paused here a moment, as a sound had suddenly reached their ears.

The moon was rising, and at its full; it sent a flood of silver light in the valley, so they drew back in the shadow of the trees, watching and waiting.

Again the sound was heard, and Buffalo Bill said quickly:

"It is the neighing of a horse," and to carry him out in this, Comrade gave a low whinny and grew very nervous.

"Be still, Comrade, and don't spoil all," sternly ordered the scout, and in silence they waited.

"Look there!"

It was the Hermit Parson who spoke, and he pointed down the valley.

"It is a horse and rider," calmly said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, and—"

"You were going to say they are phantoms, and they look it, both horse and rider," and the scout gazed at them in amazement.

The animal was snowy white, and the rider was robed in white, from head down. They came on slowly, directly toward the clump of trees.

"Keep still, Comrade, and don't be nervous, for you may have to chase that phantom-like steed," said the scout to his horse, for the animal was now very uneasy.

"What are they?" calmly asked the old hermit, glad that the scout could see for himself that there were strange mysteries in those mountains that had so long been his dwelling-place.

"I do not know."

"What will you do?"

"I shall lariat the rider and then catch the horse in a race, for if he is real flesh and blood Comrade can do it."

"Please hold the end of my lariat."

The hermit obeyed, and taking the noose end the scout coiled it carefully and turned his horse quietly so as to be able to throw the lariat strong and true.

The spectral-looking horse and rider were still coming on, in the same slow pace, and, following the deer-trail they were in, must pass within thirty feet of the clump of trees.

The moon shone in a cloudless sky, and not a sound broke the death-like silence of the valley.

Nearer and nearer drew the specter steed and rider; then Buffalo Bill said in a whisper as the Hermit Parson stood by the side of his horse:

"Now, Rip Van Winkle, you will see me lasso a ghost!"

As he spoke he sent the lasso flying through the air.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TELL-TALE PICTURE.

THE woman who had arrived at the Sinner's Rest Tavern, in Saw Dust City, was one to attract attention under any circumstances, and especially when she came to a rough mining-camp town.

She was dressed in deep black, and yet her attire was stylish, even in its mourning look, and she had a figure that was shapely, a carriage that was commanding.

Her face was lovely, rather handsome, and about it was a fascination, a softness that commanded respect, for it was a face to remember—a face to revere, so Madonna-like was it in its purity and sadness.

Why she had come to Saw Dust City none knew, but all guessed.

"She's a deserted wife whose husband has come out here and struck it rich," said one.

"She's on her trail of her hubble, and don't you mistake," another remarked.

"Maybe she's engaged ter a feller as did not go back arter her, and she's come ter see jist how it are with him," a third suggested.

"No, her lover hes come out here and died suddint-like, with his boots on, and she are arter findin' his grave, and she'll tote ther remnants back hum, mark my words."

"She's got widder's weeds on, anyhow."

"I wonder what she did come fer?"

Such were the remarks that went around the rough crowd, and the last was just what all wished to know.

When she, to oblige them, began to sing, then she won the heart of every man in the crowd, and right there she made her power felt.

Untiringly—though she was, without doubt, fatigued after her long and rough ride in the coach—she sung song after song, and the moon—

beams glistened upon many a tear from eyes that had not been moist for years.

There was no applause, for the long-drawn breath, the deep sigh were more impressive than the clapping of hands and stamping of feet.

She held them spell-bound with her rich, exquisite voice, and when she at last bowed and retreated she left a silence behind her that could be felt.

For some moments no one moved, no one spoke, fearing to break the spell, and then one man slipped away, another followed, and before long the crowd had gone to their camps, not willing there and that night to break the charm with rude laughter, coarse jokes and gambling.

"Ther woman will make preachers o' ther boys of this keeps on."

"Why, ther bar looks like a graveyard, and I'll let ther boys hev a night off and shut up."

"But then, I don't blame ther fellers, for 'tain't often they gits music as r'iles up thar souls, and they'll go home an' think o' the'r sins arter it, and maybe them as owes me will come and pay me."

"Waal, I'm sorry the Don hed ter go away; but, as he are gone, I'll move ther leddy inter his room fer ther time she are here, however long that may be, fer it are ther dandy room o' ther house."

So said Bunco, the landlord of the Sinner's Rest, and he was preparing to shut up his bar and tavern, which had not been heard of before, although it was Sunday night, when a boy darted into the saloon and cried:

"Give me some lick, Bunco, quick! fer a poor man has a fit and needs it."

The man poured out the liquor and said, as he still held the glass:

"Give me ther money fu'st, young 'un."

"I hain't no money, but I'll pay yer when I git it," declared the boy.

"Then no lick does yer git, kid, out o' me."

But Bunco was taken aback, for a pistol muzzle suddenly glanced up into his face and the boy said firmly:

"Give me that lick, and quick, for I was sent arter it, and I wants it."

Bunco handed it over without a word, vowing vengeance mentally, and the boy darted out of the door.

"Darn his pictur', I'll—"

"I will pay you, sir, for the liquor," and Bunco saw the Black Canary before him.

"Did you see that boy, ma'am?" he said in a foolish kind of way, for it cut him to be caught in so mean an act by his fair boarder.

"I did, sir, and I feel that the boy needed the liquor for what he said he did, and will pay you."

"In case he may not take this."

"Oh, no, ma'am! You see, I didn't want the boy to have it, fearing he wanted to drink it himself, and I does not wish ter encourage vice in one so young."

"Please take this money and say no more about it," and the lady held out a half-dollar piece.

"No indeed, ma'am, I wouldn't take it; but I wants ter tell yer how much ther boys was delighted with yer singin'."

"Why, yer sent 'em all off with tears in ther eyes and as soft-hearted as doves."

"Thar'll not be a keerd throwed, ner a oath cursed around here *this* Sunday night."

"I am glad if I gave the poor men pleasure, for I suppose they see little of it in this wild place; but, have you kept hotel here long, sir?"

"Four year, ma'am."

"And have you ever heard of a man in these mines by the name of Carter Creighton?"

"No, ma'am, I never heerd ther name ontill I seen yourn on ther books."

"Your husband, maybe?"

She paid no attention to the remark and asked:

"Who would be most likely to tell me, if such a person was among the mining-camps?"

"Le'm see, ma'am: I guess the Don is about as well posted as any man, for he has circulated around among the camps, though he hain't been in these parts very long."

"And who is the Don?"

"A gambler o' ther fu'st-class, m'am. He left, tho', ter-night ter go way fer some leetle time."

"Is he a Spaniard?"

"Guess he's a Mexican; but I don't know, m'am, no more than does anybody else."

"He's a dandy fer looks, tho', and bad with steel or shootin'-iron, and you'd be pleased ef you know'd him."

"Well, as he is gone, can you think of any one else who might know just who is in the camps?"

Before Bunco could reply the boy who had demanded and received the glass of liquor, at the muzzle of a revolver, dashed in.

"Here's yer glass, Bunco, and here's yer dust, and I borren'd it ter pay yer."

"Did ther man turn his toes up, kid?"

"No, he got better, and the liquor was too late, and, lucky for him it were, for I give it to a Chinee and it strangled him—beg pardon, miss, but I heerd you sing ter-night, an' it was so sweet I jist thort ther angels was a-playin' on ther golden harps," and the boy doffed his cap and bowed to the woman in black.

She saw a youth of thirteen, perhaps, though it was very hard to guess his years, his face had such a quaint old look.

He wore buckskin leggings and top-boots, a red flannel shirt, a broad-brimmed sombrero and a belt about his waist, and in it were two revolvers and a long-bladed bowie.

His hair was golden and worn long, and the heels of his top-boots were armed with a pair of spurs.

At first he looked as though he had put on the rig of a desperado for fun; but a second glance showed that all was worn with an air of deadly earnestness.

His skin was brown, his eyes dark-blue and full of mischief, and, altogether, his face was brimming over with audacity, resolution and intelligence combined.

His form was slight, wiry, and had the indication of strength and endurance.

He had doffed his cap in the presence of the lady, and what he had said, though in border slang, was certainly not unpleasant to her.

"I thank you most kindly for your appreciation of my singing, and I hope, if I stay here awhile, I will see you again," said the lady, in her pleasant way.

"It'll be your fault, miss, if you don't, for I'm willin'," was the frank response.

"What is your name, may I ask?"

"Ther pilgrims about here calls me Uncle Solomon, 'cause I knows so much, and some o' 'em gives me ther name o' Old Nick's Kid, 'cause I is so bad; but it don't make no odds what they calls me, 'tain't my Sunday-school name and I don't tell it, though I don't mind lettin' you know it sometime, though not before this bar-room doctor."

And the boy glanced wickedly at Bunco, who he seemed to know was trying to make a good impression upon his fair boarder.

"Don't mind him, m'am, for he are the wu'st kid in ther mines, and ther boys jist spoils him; but, ef yer wants ter know anything about anybody in these parts, he kin tell yer, fer he knows 'em all."

"Indeed! Then perhaps you can tell me if you know a man in the mines by the name of Carter Creighton?"

"Let me see, miss! I seen that name on a letter-back as come to ther town one day in ther mail, and it were a galoot as we used ter call Cap Carter as had it."

"I seen him break ther envelop and read it."

"Who was this Captain Carter, for I suppose you meant *captain*, when you said Cap?" eagerly asked the lady.

"Yas, but we called him Cap, miss."

"Waal, now, he were as bad as yer make 'em. Yer 'members him, Bunco, and how he killed poor Dan Skinner one day over a game o' keards, and then said, as Dan were a good feller he should be planted prime, and so sent up ter ther Trapper Parson and got him ter plant him with prayer?"

"Oh, he were a dandy, was the Cap, miss; and he paid all ther funeral expenses, and treated ther mourners in ther bargain."

"What kind of a looking man was he?"

"Tall, with broad shoulders, dressed spry, had a full beard and long hair, and talked straight from ther book and no lingo."

"You know of no other name he bore than that of Carter?"

"As I said, I seen ther name o' Carter Creighton on his letter-back, and it were in a lady's fist, too, miss."

"I thank you, Sol, for I shall so call you, and I wish to know if you can aid me while I am here?"

"What ter do, miss?"

"You know the camps well?"

"From Gold Dust ter Saw Dust, miss."

"Well, suppose you be my guide, for I wish to visit all the camps, and I will pay you well for your services."

"I'll be guide, miss; but I'll consider I is layin' up treasures in heaven in sarvin' you, and won't take no pay."

"But you must live."

"No danger o' my dyin', miss."

"But how do you live?"

"I find a speck o' gold-dust now and then, does sarvice o' one kind and another, kills game and sells it, and gets along fu'st-class."

"Have you no parents?"

"Nary parent, miss."

"Where did you come from?"

"I doesn't remember much o' my infancy; but it seems I hes been knockin' round minin'-camps o' late years."

"Have you no friends?"

"I has a horse, miss, and he's a dandy."

"And I will want a horse, too."

"Bunco will hire or sell you one, miss; but, watch him, for he'll cheat yer if he gits ther chance."

"You git out, Kid, or I'll—"

"No, no, Bunk, don't promise, for you'll never pay!"

"Well, miss, I'll be round in ther mornin', and all yer hes ter do is ter call me when yer wants me," and Uncle Solomon bowed with the

grace of a courtier, as he backed out, while the Black Canary asked:

"Who is that boy, landlord?"

"No one here knows more than he told yer hisself, m'am; but let me say ter yer, as ther Don are ter be gone fer some time, and yer seems intendin' ter remain some days, I'll jist have his room put in order fer yer, fer it are the most pleasant in ther hotel."

"I thank you, sir, very much, and will accept your kind offer, for the one I have is not a pleasant one."

"I'll git it ready at once, m'am, and you'll excuse the Don's things bein' in thar, fer he has a picter on ther wall, an' a few weepous hung up, with a trunk and sich."

"Certainly; I will excuse everything," was the reply, and soon after the Black Canary entered the room of the Monté Man, where her own baggage had been already placed.

Upon the wall hung a photograph, time-worn, and with a skillfully-cut-out leather frame, evidently the artistic work of some miner.

Taking up the candle the woman glanced at the picture.

It was the likeness of a young man of twenty, with a handsome, but reckless face.

"It is his picture! His vanity in keeping this has betrayed him!" she said in a voice that quivered, and instantly she left the room and sought the landlord.

"Mr. Bunco, whose picture is that in the room I occupy, for the face seems strangely familiar?" she asked calmly.

"Ther Don said it was his pictur', miss, taken when he were a young man."

She turned away without a word, and seeking the room once more said:

"So, Carter Creighton, you are known here as Don, the Monté Man?"

"Well, you are the one I seek, and I shall find you," and there came into the beautiful eyes a look that was wicked in its intense hatred—a look that boded no good for Don, the Monte Man, who had so quickly departed at sight of her.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY.

"UNCLE SOLOMON," as he was more generally called, was up bright and early the next morning, and arranging his toilet with greater care than was his custom, except on Sundays, he cooked his breakfast and mounted his wiry mustang to go to the Sinner's Rest and keep his appointment with the Black Canary.

The boy dwelt in the outskirts of Saw Dust City, on a hill where was a clump of pines, growing under an overhanging cliff.

The cabin was a substantial one, well built, comfortable and as nicely furnished as any in the camps.

The fact is, it had been the home of three different miners, and each one had added to its improvements and furniture, but each one had met his death, strange to say, soon after taking possession, and so it had been left vacant, no one caring to fly in the face of Fate and be the fourth to take the risk of occupying it.

But hearing of their superstitious dread of the place, Uncle Solomon had determined to make it his home, for he said he didn't care if the ghosts of the three miners occupied it with him.

And so the boy did what men dared not do, made the cabin his abiding-place.

There was a good stable for his pony; the view from the front was grand, looking up and down the valley as it did at the mining-camps, the winding stream, the green hills and bold mountains in the background.

The pine trees about it sheltered it from the fierce winds, and the cliff against which it was built protected it greatly.

When he made a "stake" in any way, Uncle Solomon was wont to lay in a stock of provisions, so that he never went hungry, and in starting from home that morning he laid in a goodly supply, for he did not know just how long the mysterious visitor to Saw Dust City would wish to remain away.

So up to the Sinner's Rest he rode, mounted upon his mustang, which was said to be the most vicious piece of horseflesh in the camps, and was so, if looks were any indication.

Early though it was, the woman calling herself Clarice Creighton was up and out upon what served as a piazza for the tavern, and her coming there had "headed off" several old drunkards who could not get into the bar without her seeing them, and, having made good resolves the night before, did not wish to break them with the one whose sweet voice had prompted said resolves in full sight.

She bowed pleasantly to the boy, and then said:

"I must ask you to go and select me a horse and have him ready for me, while I get my breakfast, and I will make you treasurer, so see if you can catch this."

And she tossed him her purse.

Red Eye, the boy's pony had been so persistently abused by the miners when his master was not around that he naturally supposed the purse was aimed at him and sprung quickly aside to avoid a blow; but Uncle Solomon skillfully

caught it, while Clarice Creighton applauded his dexterity and horsemanship by clapping her hands and saying:

"You ride splendidly, Solomon; but your horse seems very wild."

"It's the miners, miss, who don't like Red Eye, that's his name, 'cause they's afeerd of him, as he fights fer me like a pard."

"But, does yer wish ter hire or buy a horse?"

"Which will be best?"

"Ter buy, I guesses, as old Bunco will charge you about the same for a few days' hire as to buy, for he's a robber."

"Thar, boy, you is slanderin' meagin'" called out Bunco, who was approaching and heard the remark.

"No, I hain't; I is tellin' ther truth; but all right, miss, I'll git yer horse and see yer hain't cheated, too."

And Solomon rode away, while the woman went in to breakfast, declining Bunco's arm, which he awkwardly offered.

Her departure was the signal for a rush from their various hiding-places of men who were looking for the bar-room.

Uncle Solomon was not gone long, and returned leading a very fine sorrel mare, arrayed with a lady's saddle.

He saw that the bar was pretty well crowded, and calling to a Chinese to hold the horses, he darted into the office, picked up the Black Canary's riding-hat with its sable plume and veil, and putting them on poked his head in the door, saying in an assumed voice:

"Oh, gentlemen! for shame, for shame!"

Glasses were set down with a crash and there was a general stampede of the drinkers, when Sol's merry laugh told how he had fooled them.

There were scowling faces turned upon him, and he might have gotten into trouble for his little joke, for several had had their mouths full and were badly strangled, but just then Clarice Creighton came out upon the piazza in her black riding-habit, which fitted her to perfection.

She had seen the boy's little joke and enjoyed it in silence, for she pretended not to know it, and thanked him for holding her hat and whip for her.

Just then there were wild yells without, and the Black Canary turned pale, while Sol said, coolly:

"Don't get skeert, miss, fer it's only Red Eye chawin' up some Chinese thet hes pestered him."

And as they went out upon the piazza the fair stranger to the ways of Saw Dust City discovered that Solomon had diagnosed the situation correctly, as Red Eye had set his teeth in the shoulder of the Chinese, who thought he could hold him better by mounting him than on foot.

"Thet horse don't allow no liberties tuk with him, miss, fer a fact," said the boy, proudly, and as he led up his purchase, he continued:

"How does yer like ther critter I has bought, miss, fer yer?"

"A beautiful animal indeed, and a good one, if she is only half as good as she looks," and, with a light spring, she was in the saddle, and all remarked that she was a superb horse-woman.

Handing to the boy a pair of large saddlebags, which he had loaned his fair guest to carry some things in, Bunco asked:

"Will yer be back ter-night, ma'am?"

"Yes," was the reply, and she rode away, with Uncle Solomon by her side.

But the promise to return was not kept, for night came and they did not return.

And the next day they came not, nor the next, and then a search-party started out to find them.

But the search was fruitless, for no tidings could be heard of them after leaving Saw Dust City, and as weeks passed by and months followed, the strange disappearance of the mysterious woman and her boy guide became the nightly theme of conversation around every camp-fire, and the most superstitious of the miners shook their heads solemnly, as if to say there was something supernatural in this remarkable affair.

CHAPTER X.

A SABLE GHOST.

WHEN Buffalo Bill threw the lasso from his covert among the trees, he felt sure of catching the object of his aim, for no man on the plains could throw a lariat more skillfully.

True, he had never before tried to lasso a ghost, as this appeared to be; but his nerve did not desert him on that account, his arm did not lose its strength, and the coil went true and settled down over the shoulders of the white-robed form.

A shriek, as wild as a panther's cry, broke from the lips of the spectral-looking being, while the white horse, with a startled snort, bounded away, at the same instant that Buffalo Bill shot Comrade out of the ambush in chase.

The spring of the horse, with the tightening of the lasso, one end of which was held by the old hermit, dragged the ghost from the back of the animal to the ground, which it struck with a heavy thud.

Instantly the hermit was by the side of the

prostrate form, and bending over it, while Buffalo Bill was flying away in hot pursuit of the white steed.

Glancing up the one thus dragged to earth beheld the weird being bending above him, and a groan of terror broke from his lips.

Glancing down upon his prisoner the hermit beheld a form robed in white, a hood over the head and two holes cut for the eyes.

"Man or ghost, who are you?" sternly said the hermit, and he drew back the string of his bow, while an arrow was set and pointed right down upon the prisoner so rudely taken.

"I hain't no ghost, Massa Deble, I only a poor nigger, dat's all, sah," came in trembling tones.

The hermit seemed to feel no fear now of his captive, and seeing that Buffalo Bill was returning with the captured horse, he said sternly:

"Take off that hood and let me see who you are!"

"Yes, sah, I do it mighty quick, Massa Deble."

"Why do you call me the devil?"

"Hain't you him, sah?"

"No, I am a man like yourself, only more unfortunate than you," was the sad reply.

"I misfortunate 'nuff, sah, an' fore de Lord, I thought you was Ole Massa Nick, 'deed I did, sah, for I has heard o' sich doin's in these mountains, I was prepared ter see anybody, sah; but who dat comin' yonder wid my horse?"

"Buffalo Bill, the scout."

"Lordy! now my hoe-cake am cooked, sart'in!" groaned the negro, who had taken the hood from his face and stood revealed in his proper person.

"What do you mean?"

"I means that Massa Buffler Bill got me dead ter rights, boss, and this nigger is gwine ter be shooted."

"I does wish I hed never left ther ole cotton plantation in Alabama ter goster sojerin'; but, maybe he won't recognize me, bein' as 'most all niggers looks alike, sah," and the man trembled as the scout rode up and called out:

"Well, parson, I caught the phantom steed, and he's a good one too; but what have you got there—a black ghost?"

"It is a negro, Bill, and you may find something out by questioning him."

The scout dismounted and approached the prisoner.

"Hello, Toby, what are you doing here?" demanded Buffalo Bill, recognizing the negro as a sergeant in colored regiment, who had deserted some months before, to escape being shot for a murder of which he pleaded his ignorance, and which it was afterward proven he had not been guilty of.

"Massa Buffler, you knows me, sah?" and the negro tried to turn his face away from the moonlight.

"I should think so, for how could I forget any man who has done what you are guilty of?" and the scout looked sternly at the prisoner, determined not to let him know that he was aware of his innocence of the charge against him, and with this held over him, to make him useful to him, for he well knew Toby's pluck and endurance, and that he was noted as a trailer, being called at the fort the Sable Scout.

"Massa Buffler, I wasn't guilty, sah, and that's why I lit out, fer I didn't want ter be hanged up fer nothin', sah; so I deserted."

"And that is a shooting offense, Sergeant Toby; but I wish you to give an account of yourself, and if I am satisfied you tell the truth, I will enlist you in my service and promise you full pardon for your crimes when you get back, if you serve me well."

"You kin do it, sah, yes you kin, and I'll jist sarve you from now until death day, sah."

"I believe you, Toby; but now, tell me what you are doing here, all robed in white like a ghost?"

"Massa Buffler, I sneaked off from the fort 'cause matters was lookin' dubious fer me, and I tried to hide in ther mining-camps; but seemed to me folks kinder knowed me, and as I hed heard thar was gold up in ther mountains, I thought I'd come and find some."

"But I hed also heard as how thar was ghosteses and sich, and I didn't like thet much; but then I hed either ter risk ther ghosteses or hangin' fer murder I didn't do, and be tarning inter a ghost myself, and I concluded I'd come."

"Then ther idee struck me, Massa Buffler Bill, thet perhaps I'd do well playin' ghost myself, and I jist goes inter ther camp, buys me a full outfit o' shrouds, or muslin ter make 'em, buys a extra horse, with provisions, ammunition, a pick, ax and shovel, and comes into these durned mountains."

"Where did you get your money?"

"I were paid off, sah, afore I left ther fort, you recomembers, and I made a little more in ther mines, sah."

"All right, you came into these mountains to fight the devil with fire."

"No, sah, ter dig gold and ter play ghosteses myself, so as ter skeer off t'others."

"I see; but when did you get here?"

"Two days ago, sah."

"Where is your camp?"

"I goin' thar now, sah, for I hed been out on a tramp this arternoon."

"Have you seen any ghosts?"

"Massa Bill, I has."

"Well?"

"And I jist laid low, sah, fer there was five of 'em."

"Where did you see them?"

"Up ther valley, sah, in broad daylight this arternoon, and they was going along slow, ridin' white ghost horses, and my! but I was tremulous at sight of 'em, sah."

"You could find the place where you saw them?"

"Yes, sah."

"Well, we will go there to-morrow; but now understand that you are to serve me well, and in return I am to get you a pardon?"

"Yas, sah."

"No treachery."

"I hain't no two-faced nigger, Massa Buffler."

"No, I have always found you a square fellow, brave, and a good borderman, and a good Indian-fighter, for you stood by me several times when your men ran off, and it surprised me to think you would kill a poor army settler and rob him," and Bill spoke with mock seriousness.

"Fore de Lord, sah, I didn't do it."

"Well, I'll have to take your word for it, so now we'll look up your camp."

"Yas, sah; but won't de ole gem'man who I tuk fer de debble ride my horse, sah?"

And Toby looked askance at the Hermit Parson, who had stood by in silence regarding him attentively during his talk with Buffalo Bill.

"No, my man, thank you; I prefer to walk."

"I got another animal at my camp, sah, so I kin ride him," urged the colored sergeant; but the Hermit Parson still declined, and the three set off together toward the camp.

It was found hidden away in a vale, and getting his traps together Toby divided them up so that the hermit should ride his pack-horse, which was really a very fine animal.

Then the three set out for the camp of the old man on the mountain ridge and were turning into the trail leading up from the valley when, suddenly, there came the rapid clatter of hoofs, the ringing neigh of a horse and the loud bark of a dog.

An instant more, and there dashed by in the moonlight a snow-white horse, with some object strapped upon his back, and running ahead of him was a huge black dog.

"Here, take these things and I will give chase, while you follow me!"

And away Buffalo Bill dashed like the wind, in chase of the mysterious Dumb Pards—the white steed and the black dog.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUMB PARDS.

WHEN the scout set off in hot pursuit of the horse and dog that had dashed by them down the valley he felt confident of soon solving that mystery at least.

He knew the speed of his splendid horse and his endurance, and he had yet to see the animal that could hold the lead of him in a long run.

In chasing the white horse, from whose back the negro, Toby, had been so rudely dragged by the lariat, Buffalo Bill had run alongside of the animal and grasped his bridle-rein before he had gone the eighth of a mile.

Now he settled himself in his saddle and urged Comrade on, and the noble horse fairly flew along the trail.

But the white steed and the black dog held their own, and, with a hundred yards start, seemed resolved to keep it.

As the scout shot out into the bright moonlight the dog gave a startled yelp, and the horse a neigh, as a note of alarm, and their speed increased greatly, for they had been going at the pace of a sweeping gallop.

"Come, Comrade, you are not doing well," said the scout, urging on his horse, when he saw that he was not gaining.

And the noble animal responded by warming up to his work, and pushing ahead with greater speed.

Still he did not gain.

"Why, Comrade, what are you about? On, sir, on!" and Buffalo Bill just touched his flanks with the spurs, and the noble beast fairly bounded forward in tremendous leaps, as he felt that his master was angry with him.

Still the Dumb Pards ahead gained slowly, and the scout could see it.

"I must have that horse, for Comrade, you have at last more than met your match," the scout said, firmly.

Once or twice he half brought his rifle around, as though to use it, but quickly checking the intention, he said:

"No, it would be sacrilege to kill either the horse or the dog; but I must have them, and I will, if I stay in these mountains for months."

Then, to see if Comrade could really increase his pace, and noting that the horse and dog had doubled the distance they had held, he spurred his own beast sharply.

But though Comrade snorted with anger and

strained every nerve and muscle, the two strange pards ahead held their own steadily.

"Ah! my poor Comrade, I am driving you hard, and for no use— Ha! they have disappeared!"

It was true, for just as the scout was about to draw rein and give up the chase, the Dumb Pards disappeared.

So he rode hastily on to the spot where he had last seen them flying along in the moonlight.

Just here were piles of rock and scattering clumps of trees, while the trail they had been following reached the river and ran along its banks.

But he could see for some distance along the bank, and he knew they had not gone that way.

There was but one other way they could go, unless they had dodged behind some of the rocks and trees, and were hiding, and that was into the river, which here dashed swiftly along.

To go into the river they must take a leap of some ten feet, and the scout could not believe they had done that intentionally, but perhaps gone over by accident.

So he looked among the rocks and trees, that could afford a shelter, and then returned to the river-bank, just where the trail curved, and arrived there as the Hermit Parson and Toby rode up.

"Well, they have gone?" he said in a disappointed tone.

"Your horse could not overtake them, Buffalo Bill!" asked the hermit.

"No, sah, in course he c'u'dn't, though I knows what Comrade kin do; but then them animiles hain't human," urged Toby.

"No, Toby, they are not human, but belong to the brute creation," the scout said, smiling at Toby's remark.

"Dey hain't real brutes nuther, Massa Buf'ler, but phantoms, and as Comrade didn't catch 'em it proves dat."

"Where did they go?" asked the hermit with interest.

"I saw them last just about here, and, as they had steadily gained on me, in spite of all I could do, I determined not to worry my horse, and was about reining up when they suddenly disappeared."

"They did not go down the trail, for we can see a long distance, and they are not hidden among the bushes or rocks, for I have looked."

"Then they could only go over here into the river?"

"That's it, parson."

"And are lost?"

"No, sah, them hain't lost, I knows, for water don't drown, bullet don't kill, and fire don't burn things like them."

"No, sah, them is spirit animiles!"

"No more than were you a ghost, Toby, and I will yet prove it to you; but, parson, suppose we camp here on their trail for the balance of the night, so as to be on hand at daybreak and see what tracks they leave, though according to Toby, their trails will not be visible?"

"As you please, Buffalo, for I think it would be a good idea," answered the Hermit Parson, and the three sought a hiding-place for their horses among the rocks and stunted pines, and then threw themselves down upon their blankets, only a few yards from the trail which the Dumb Pards had followed in their rapid flight.

The scout lay awake for some time, and his thoughts were busy with the discoveries he had made in those mountains, which he had not believed inhabited by mortal man.

He had looked upon the stories told by the Hermit Parson as imaginings of a diseased brain, and yet he had certainly seen proofs that there were most unfathomable mysteries in that weird land.

He had met there the old Mad Trailer, he had discovered the colored soldier Toby, and he had seen for himself the mysterious Dumb Pards.

A grave marked the place where a man lay, who had worn the bracelet, riveted on his wrist, of the Knights of the Silver Circle, whoever or whatever they might be, and he had seen the strange circle painted on the rocky cliff, with the motto that death alone would unrivet the bond of that Circle of Silver.

And so the scout lay awake and pondered over these mysteries.

He had come into the Montana mountains in a spirit of adventure, and he was not one to give up a trail until the end was reached, especially when there was a stern duty to perform in rescuing the poor little Wild Rose from the power of the man who had kidnapped her, after slaying her father and causing the death of her mother.

The Trapper Parson had tracked them into these mountains, and to a certain point, and then the trail became a lost trail.

Buffalo Bill had tried his skill in ferreting out the mystery, but he could go no further than had the old hermit.

The trail had an ending surely, but that was not it.

There were others certainly in these mountains, but where were they?

Don, the Monté Man, had come there with his captive, and yet he had not left there, the Hermit Trapper felt certain.

Who was the man that had worn the silver

circle about his wrist, and who had been torn to pieces by a pack of wolves, while his horse and himself had both been bound?

What cruel mystery was there in this?

And the Dumb Pards?

They certainly were not running wild in these mountains, or how about the pack the horse carried, the silver circle about the dog's neck?

Then, too, who was the man who had lassoed the horse and been slain by the dog?

Altogether the brave scout had a world of thought, with mystery at the bottom of all, a seemingly unfathomable bottom, as he lay awake in his blanket, while near him peacefully slumbered Toby, and the Hermit Trapper lay motionless, but also awake.

Presently the scout dropped off to sleep, and his repose was undisturbed until dawn was stealing over the valley and paling the moonlight.

Then he awoke, for a sound broke on his ears, ever alert even in sleep.

He raised up and saw that the Hermit Trapper was also aroused.

It was the rapid clatter of hoofs, and they were coming toward where they were.

"Up, Toby, for some one is coming," Buffalo Bill ordered.

"It is the hoof-falls of that wild horse, for I know them well," said the hermit.

To reach their horses and mount would be impossible, in the short time they had, the scout knew, so he said quickly:

"We must lasso him then. You, parson, try for the horse with me, and, Toby, you take the dog."

Buffalo Bill knew that the negro soldier was noted as a lariat-thrower, while he was not so sure of the Hermit Parson, never having seen him throw a rope, so he asked him to try for the horse.

Their lassoes were at hand with their saddles, and quickly they seized them and sprung to position behind the nearest rock or tree facing toward the trail.

A moment more and the black dog appeared in sight, and behind him came the white horse.

They were dashing swiftly along with the wind, so the keen senses of the dog had not caught the scent of their foes.

"Golly! but dat am a big dog ter tackle!"

"I thinks he's a grizzly," said Toby, but he had his lasso ready to throw.

A moment more and the Dumb Pards were in range, and all was ready for the word from the scout to cast the lassos.

"No! throw and the Dumb Pards are ours!" cried Buffalo Bill in thrilling tones, and the three lasso coils went whirling through the air.

CHAPTER XII.

FOUND AND LOST.

WHEN Buffalo Bill gave the word to throw, the three lassoes left the hands of the three men at the same instant.

The negro soldier's aim was to lasso the huge black dog, and he aimed well, for the noose settled over the brute's head.

The Hermit Parson and Buffalo Bill both aimed to lariat the white steed, and their aim too was true, for over the small head, down upon the arched neck the coils settled.

The scout's quick glance told him that all three lassos had fallen true, and then broke from his stern lips an exultant shout, which Toby, the soldier, echoed with a wild halloo, though the Hermit Parson gave no cry.

The cries of exultation, of triumph in their success, certainly seemed merited, and yet they had been, to use a border slang, a "trifle too previous."

And why?

Toby had not put on his belt of arms, in seizing his lasso, and the moment the noose settled over the head of the dog, the brute gave a savage yelp and bounded directly for the negro.

Toby was as brave as a lion where mankind were concerned, but he did have a holy horror of dogs and snakes.

And such a dog!

A brute of enormous size, with long, white glittering teeth, and a shaggy hide like a bear.

In that sharp, vicious yelp, half-growl, half-bark, he showed just how furious he was, and he made directly for Toby, almost before the noose could be tightened to drag him to earth.

Toby had not made his lariat fast, in fact he did not see the need of it, in lassoing a dog, and, as the huge brute came bounding toward him, the negro dropped the rope and deserted the field.

To fly from so swift an animal he knew was useless, and shoot him he could not, so he made his exit from earth by means of a tree; springing up to a limb and catching it, he drew himself out of the dog's mouth just in the nick of time.

In the mean time Buffalo Bill had made his lasso end fast to a small sapling, growing in the rock, while the Hermit Parson had simply held one end in his hand, and the effect was surprising, for the shock of bringing the horse to a halt tore up the little tree by the roots, and jerked the old trapper off his feet.

In an instant the splendid animal had sprung away, towing the two lassos, to one of which

was trailing the little sapling, which had been so rudely torn from its hold among the rocks.

Seeing his horse Comrade flying away, the dog had given up a premeditated attack upon the scout and trapper, for he had started toward them, and went bounding after the white steed also trailing the lariat after him.

"Lost them both, so we did!" cried Buffalo Bill, running toward his horse and seizing his saddle on the way.

"No use ter chase 'em, Massa Bill, fer they hain't ter be tuk," answered Toby, dropping from his perch in the tree.

"I'll try at least, and, parson, you and Toby come on as fast as you can."

And Buffalo Bill soon had Comrade bridled and saddled and set off in hot chase.

With the dog drawing the lasso and the horse a small sapling, the scout felt hopes that they would both be caught in some way, and he rode on at the full speed of his horse, while the trapper and Toby also followed, but at a slower pace, the latter riding his pack-horse.

The Dumb Pards had disappeared from sight before the scout had mounted, but then he knew that such a trail as they would leave would be very readily found and followed.

The sun was now above the horizon, so that the darkest shadows of the valley could be penetrated and, with the day before them, Buffalo Bill was assured that some discovery should be made regarding this strange mystery of the mountains.

For some distance he dashed along, Comrade running easily and very rapidly, and seeming himself to be anxious to overtake the two animals who had dropped him behind so easily in his last chase of them.

Presently the spot came into the view of the scout where the horse and dog had disappeared on the other occasion, and he knew as he approached the bank that they had again eluded him, for there was no hiding-place there for them.

A moment more and he drew rein upon the bank overhanging the swiftly-flowing stream.

There lay, neatly coiled, the three lassoes, the little sapling was standing against a rock near, its branches scarred and leaves torn by being dragged over the ground, but nowhere visible were the Dumb Brutes.

They had disappeared most mysteriously.

To do so they must spring from the bank down the ten feet into the swiftly-flowing waters of the river, for the trail turned neither to the right nor left, but ended just there.

Soon the Trapper Parson and Toby came up and found the scout standing there in deep meditation.

He seemed slightly bewildered by what had happened.

"You got the lassoes, but not the animals?" said the trapper, inquiringly.

"I found those three lassoes lying there, coiled just as you see them, and the little tree the horse pulled up by the roots, standing just there," answered Buffalo Bill.

"The dog and horse could not coil the lassoes," said the trapper.

"No, only a human being could have released them and placed the ropes there."

"It was sperrits, Massa Buf'ler, thet's what it were," Toby said, anxiously glancing about him.

"But you could not have been more than two or three minutes behind the animals, Buffalo Bill?"

"No, and whoever took off the ropes worked fast, but where did he go, and where are the Dumb Pards?"

"This is the only place they could reach the river to jump in, for see how rough the bank is above and below, and a mountain goat could hardly find footing there."

"True, parson, and their trails lead right here, as you see."

"Yes, and they sprung into the river?"

"Yes, they could do nothing else."

"Then they are drowned, for they could not swim in these wild waters long."

"Yet right here is where I lost them before, and they turned up again."

"No, parson, there is a mystery about this, and if the dog and the horse went into the stream, the man who took off their lassoes did the same, and where one man went another can go."

"Do you mean that you will go into the stream?"

"Yes, parson, and you and Toby camp yonder in that thicket and get breakfast, while I take a little swim," and Buffalo Bill quickly divested himself of his clothing, wrapped a revolver in a waterproof rubber cloth, placed his lasso about his waist, and sprung from the bank into the stream.

He was swept down the stream like a flash, and soon whirled out of sight of the trapper and Toby, who were watching him.

He was swept along by the swift current for several hundred yards, the banks still steep and impassable, and they seemed so for a long distance below.

But he was watching them closely, and his eyes fell upon a break in them, and he swam toward it.

And just in time he put forth his strength, for otherwise the current would have swept him by. It was a narrow chasm in the rocky wall, which served as a bank; but the footing was good, and he saw that the landing was easily made.

The rocks were wet, and for some distance, showing that the horse and dog had landed there, and by making the leap into the river above, had thus eluded capture where the trail ended.

"Those brutes have been well trained," muttered Buffalo Bill, "to thus seek safety in flight and double upon a pursuer."

"I will see where this trail leads me, and can perhaps head them off at this landing next time."

He followed the water-dripped trail for some distance, when it ceased and he had to depend upon the tracks of the animals.

These led to a cavern in the rocks; but seeing daylight beyond the scout boldly ventured into the dark place and came out upon a broad plain, or meadow-land, and from here he could find no direct trail, though the animals had evidently crossed it.

Glancing about him he recognized a lightning-riven tree in the distance, which he had observed not far from the spot they had camped in during the night, and he made his way toward it, struck the trail along which the Dumb Pards had been dashing when lariat-ed, and an hour after parting with the parson and Toby, put in an appearance before them.

They had breakfast waiting, for they had expected he would soon return, as he was not in scouting costume for a long tramp, and he sat down to it with a relish, while he told of his discoveries, remarking:

"Now we can capture that noble pair of animals by starting in chase, when we see them next, and then heading directly from the landing."

"There are rocks there which we can hide on, drop our lariats over the heads of the horse and dog and choke them into quiet, when we can tie them securely and they are our sure game."

"It looks so certainly," said the trapper, while Toby remarked:

"The rope hain't made, Massa Buf'ler, ter tie dem animiles wid, for dey is sperrits sartin'."

"Well, Toby, we can try, and my opinion is when we capture them we will discover some secret of who their masters are that we are anxious to know."

"Buffalo Bill, Providence sent you here, and I have hope now that I will find my little Wild Rose."

"It may be days, weeks, months perhaps, before we do; but I know you will solve this mystery—I feel it," said the trapper, earnestly.

"I hope so, parson, and we won't say die until there is no hope."

"I wish we was huntin' fer somethin' that wasn't sperrits," said Toby, and the scout laughed heartily at the fears of Toby, and remarked:

"Why, Toby, you played ghost yourself, and you see how we downed you, and you'll find that there is nothing but humbug at the bottom of these mountain mysteries, and, in my opinion, they have good cause for wishing to keep people out of this wild land."

"But we are here to stay, to settle, to die, if need be," and the stern, resolute face of the scout showed that he meant just what he said.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SECOND VICTIM.

HAVING finished their breakfast the trio of strange men mounted and went to the mountain camp of the Hermit Trapper.

Buffalo Bill suggested that they should go thither, put the saddle of the trapper upon the pack-horse, leave there all that was not needed, and return to a camp on the trail and await results.

This was acted upon, and Toby was shown the way to reach the hidden camp in the mountain-top.

With simply provisions enough to last them for several days, they wended their way back to a secluded spot near the trail and went into camp.

One was to stand on watch at a time, so as to make known the coming of the mysterious horse and dog, and Toby took the first watch, just at sunset, while the three horses were staked out in the background, and the scout and trapper threw up a brush shanty for their shelter in case of storm, and collected wood to have a plentiful supply on hand with which to build a fire when needed.

The old Hermit Trapper seemed to have given up all plotting and planning to the scout, and was satisfied to leave the leadership in his hands, though he himself had been a dweller in the mountains for two years.

Still he had failed to master the mystery, or find his lost grandchild, and he seemed to feel that the scout would do so, while he also had confidence in Toby the colored soldier, in spite

of his dread of ghosts, which he had expected to frighten off upon the principle of "fighting the devil with fire."

Seated in their little camp together, while Toby stood on guard a couple of hundred yards distant, near the trail, Buffalo Bill was listening to the trapper's story of the past.

The clouds seemed to have drifted away from the mind of the old borderman, and he remembered all that had passed, since he had sent his son Roy Ripley, to the college where he had graduated with honor.

Buffalo Bill listened attentively, to get every motive for revenge that an enemy might have against the old parson and his son, and he said:

"Well, parson, there is one thing certain, and that is we must rescue your Wild Rose from the power of that hardened villain, Carter Creighton."

"He kidnapped the girl, that is certain, for the paper you have, which he placarded upon your door, tells of his being the guilty one, and you tracked him into these mountains; but we are not sure he is here now, unless—"

"Unless what, Buffalo Bill?" asked the trapper.

"Unless he has discovered a gold-mine, which your son found here, and is working for all it is worth."

"In that case you feel he is still here?"

"Yes."

"But not alone?"

"Oh, no, for you have seen enough to know that he has allies."

"And you believe the horse and dog are his?"

"Yes, or belong to some other secret mining-camp."

"You know these mountains have not been thrown open to settlers, and they are really in the Indian country; but then the red-skins avoid them on account of the belief that evil spirits dwell here, and a few whites have doubtless found a footing here, where they have found gold, and it is to their interest to keep out all others until they get rich, and they will kill, scare or do anything to do so."

"Such is my theory, and I will work with the view of finding out who they are, where they are, and what they are doing here."

"And I feel that you will have success, for I have perfect confidence in you: but hark!"

The sound of running feet was heard, and a moment after Toby dashed into the camp.

The moon was rising and it revealed a scared face.

"Well, Toby, what is it?" asked Buffalo Bill, springing to his feet.

"I tell you, Massa Buf'ler, dese mountings am ha'nted, sah, 'deed they is, for I done seen another ghost."

"Where, Toby?"

"I were standin' over yonder in de thicket when, Lordy! I seen a ghost and a sperrit horse comin'."

"They come along ever so slow, and de ghost were moanin' terrible, like he was in awful agony."

"I jist lit out, sah, and come to you."

"Well, Toby, we'll see if a ghost can stand lead," and Buffalo Bill started for the spot, followed by the trapper and Toby, the latter seeming to desire to linger in the rear as far as possible.

As they went along a sharp yelp was heard, and Toby cried out:

"Dat's dat sperrit dog ag'in."

"No, Toby, that is a wolf's yelp; hark!"

And all listened, while far and near arose a chorus of yelps and barks.

"The wolves are abroad in force to-night, and we must not stay long away from the horses," said the old trapper.

"No; we'll see if we can find Toby's ghost, and then some of us must go back as guards—Hark!"

Suddenly on the air arose a wild, fearful shriek that brought the three men to a sudden halt and from Toby's lips:

"Lordy! hear dat! it's de ghost!"

That cry came from human lips, and it was in reality a cry of anguish.

"Come!"

And the scout started in the direction from which the sound had come.

But again the three halted as shriek upon shriek filled the air, echoing among the rocks and rising above howls, yelps and savage growls of wolves.

Then another scream arose, wilder, fiercer than the other.

"That is the cry of a horse in agony as well as a man."

"The wolves are upon them—come!"

With a bound Buffalo Bill was off, followed by his two comrades.

Like a deer he ran, leaving the others behind, and heading for the spot from whence came a perfect pandemonium of sounds of human cries, the screams of a horse and the yelping, snarling, growling of wolves with the scratching of many claws upon the rocky ground in some fierce struggle.

In a moment more Buffalo Bill burst out of a pine thicket into an open space and a sickening sight was revealed to him.

Struggling in one fearful heap was a mass of

wolves, fighting, rending and with fierce barks and growls tearing their victims in pieces.

With a yell and a shot from each revolver on the outskirts of the writhing mass, the scout sprang forward, and the wolves sprang away revealing their victims—a horse and his rider.

Driven from their prey by sudden flight, the wolves an instant after showed a disposition to attack the scout and, had he wavered in the slightest degree, he would quickly have met the fate of their victim.

But instantly both revolvers rung out noisily, and the scout advanced boldly as he fired, and this daring forward movement set the savage brutes to flight, though they did not retreat far, until the hermit and Toby rushing up also opened fire, when they beat a hasty retreat into the deep shadows of the pine thicket.

Then the scout sprang to the side of the man and the horse.

The man was dead, torn nearly out of all resemblance to humanity, but the horse, also fearfully lacerated by the sharp fangs of the wolves, yet writhed in his agony.

A shot from the revolver of Buffalo Bill quickly ended the animal's sufferings, and then the rider was taken from him, for he was bound to the back of the horse.

"This is just such a case as you saw once before, parson, and this man is somebody's victim," said the scout, in stern indignation.

"Yes, he was bound to the horse, which you see is but an indifferent animal and hopped, so as to prevent his going out of a slow walk."

"Yes, there is some devilish work in this which we cannot now fathom," and Buffalo Bill took the white robe that the form had been enveloped in, and placed the body upon it.

The face was that of a man of forty, heavily bearded and with long hair.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, a woollen hunting-shirt and wore no hat, and moccasins were upon his feet.

His hands had been tied together in front of him, and the white robe, which had been his shroud, seemed to have been wound about his form and fastened with a belt about his waist.

He had no weapons, and suddenly, as the trapper bent over him, as though searching for something, he called out:

"See there!"

"Well, parson?"

"The Silver Circle!"

The trapper pointed to the left wrist of the dead man, and there upon it was the bracelet, a circle of solid silver, though now it was stained with blood, for the hand had been fearfully torn.

With an effort Buffalo Bill drew off the Silver Circle, and said:

"This is number two, parson; but now, Toby, let us carry the body back near our camp and give it burial, for I am anxious about our horses."

"Massa Bill, I is afeerd ter touch thet man, sah, 'fore Heaven I is," said Toby, and without reply Buffalo Bill infolded him in the white, shroud-like mantle and raised him in his strong arms.

As they left the spot the wolves dashed out of their hiding-places, and with savage barks and vicious snarls began to feast upon the body of the horse.

Reaching a spot near camp Buffalo Bill halted, while Toby went to work cutting out a grave, and the poor victim was placed in it by Buffalo Bill, while the trapper said a prayer over the unfortunate unknown, the scene there in the moonlight, and the three men standing with uncovered heads, being a weird, solemn one there in those wild mountains of Montana.

CHAPTER XIV.

UNCLE SOLOMON AND THE BLACK CANARY.

IT will be well now to return to the mysterious lady who rode away from Sinner's Rest, in Sa-er Dust City, under the guidance of that odd youth known as Uncle Solomon, Old Nick's Kid, and other peculiar names which the christeners deemed appropriate.

The "Black Canary," as Clarice Creighton, through the unfailing custom of the country, had been named, was a superb rider, and she managed her spirited horse with ease and grace.

She knew that she had made a sensation in Saw Dust City, and she was well aware of the full power she held over men by her beauty of face and form, and her exquisite voice, while she rather liked the cognomen bestowed upon her, knowing well that the rude bordermen were wont to bestow a name, as the Indian does, from some peculiarity about them.

Her being dressed in deep black, even to her veil, and singing like a bird, had instantly suggested to some one the name of Black Canary, and in all honor toward her it was bestowed.

As Sol had spoken of his cabin on the mountain-side, and a desire to go by there for his rifle, Clarice Creighton had acquiesced, and upon reaching the humble cabin on the hillside she had dismounted and entered it, at the same time expressing herself as delighted with his neat housekeeping and the homelike air resting upon him.

"And do you live here all alone, Sol?" she asked.

"Yes, miss, and it's a nice place, too, which I have all to myself, as folks is afeerd o' ghosts they says is here; but ther ghosts don't keep me 'wake o' nights watchin' fer 'em."

"But here's my rifle, miss, and I'm ready now."

He slung his rifle at his back as he spoke, and locking his cabin door, they mounted and rode away off into the mountains, Clarice saying it was her desire to visit the different camps as they could and discover if the one she sought was known in them.

Two camps were visited and inquiries made, but without result, for though many knew the gambler as Don, the Monté Man, none were acquainted with him as Carter Creighton, and it was no wonder, as few men in those mines were known by their real names.

A wretched inn furnished a more wretched dinner for the boy guide and his fair companion, and not wishing to test such accommodations again, Clarice Creighton asked:

"Is there no place where we could pass the night, away from such miserable taverns?"

"We might go to the Trapper Parson's, miss, for he's a gent, clean through, and his family would be glad to entertain a real leddy, for they is mighty scarce products out in these diggin's," answered Sol.

"Is it far from here?"

"Only a few miles, and I knows you'll be welcome, while he's got a large cabin and they is mighty nice folks."

"Is he a minister?"

"They says so, for he holds preachin' now and then, and are always ready ter bury a man as turns up his toes in sickness, or dies with his boots on."

"It's one and ther same to ther parson, how a man dies, so long as he's dead, for he don't hold ter doctrines after death, as some does, and won't bury a stiff unless it's by ther rule o' some gilt-edged book."

"Well, let us go to his cabin, and perhaps I may get some information from him."

"You know him well, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss, I knows him, for I rode Pony Express for a few weeks, when little Gold Bullet were laid up with a wound, given him by some road-agents as wanted his bag o' letters, and I stopped at the parson's several times to change ponies, when mine cast a shoe, or went lame."

"Then I seen him when he come down to Saw Dust City to bury Gambler Gabe, whom the Don kilt at a game o' keerds."

"He did do that job up neat, I kin tell yer, miss, and the Don paid all expenses."

"You refer to the one they call Don, the Monté Man?"

"Yes, miss, and he's lightning."

"Sol, may I trust you?" asked Clarice earnestly.

"You kin for a fact, miss."

"He is the man I am looking for."

"No. The Don?"

"Yes."

"Why I c'u'd hev told yer about him."

"His name is Carter Creighton, and I have come out here to find him."

"Why he stays at ther Sinner's Rest."

"Yes, but left there last night just after I came."

"Maybe he seen yer, for a man will light out from a woman sometimes, when he won't from a half a dozen fellows."

"Well, I didn't care to let people know just who I was after, as if Carter Creighton knew I was on his track he would see that I did not find him."

"But the Don, as you call him, is the one I seek."

"We can find him, miss, for he's around the camps somewhere."

"You see he lives at the Sinner's Rest, but goes among the camps on little gambling trips, and he makes lots o' dust."

"Robbing the poor miners of their hard-earned money," said the woman, with a sneer that expressed the utmost contempt.

Then the two rode on in silence for a long time, until at last they ascended the ridge upon which was located the cabin of the Trapper Parson.

A short ride and they approached the cabin, when they saw the door ajar, the chickens going to roost unfed, for it was sunset, and a cow was lowing lustily at the stable-yard.

But no one was visible, and Sol said in surprise, as he sprang from his horse and entered:

"Lordy! what does this mean, for ther place is deserted?"

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRACKERS TRACKED.

DON, THE MONTE MAN was not one to do an evil deed half-way.

He was as cunning as he was bold, as cruel as he was reckless, and he had no mercy for any one, man, woman, or child, who stood in his way.

Playing the part of a gambler miner, he had become known and feared in all the camps.

Then disappearing in that character, when he found how near to him were those he had known

in his younger years, those upon whom he sought revenge, because he had not won and married his sweet cousin, Nellie Creighton, and Roy Ripley had, he determined to reap a vicious and fiendish vengeance.

The reader knows how he carried out his evil plot, slaying Roy Ripley, driving his wife into insanity and death, and then, shaving off his beard, changing his dress for that of a Mexican, and talking with a slight accent he assumed to perfection, he had come again among those who had known him as a gambler miner, and called himself Don, the Monté Man.

He had spread the report that he, as the gambler miner, had been killed in a distant camp, and no one allied the Don with the reported dead man, and often, as a supposed Mexican, he had sat and heard himself as the gambler abused.

There was one however who had recognized him, though by his baggage arousing suspicion, rather than from any resemblance he traced in the Don to the alleged defunct miner.

That one was Bunco, the landlord of the Sinner's Rest, who always made it a rule to examine his guest's baggage, providing his large supply of keys enabled him to open a trunk or sachel.

In this way he had discovered that the Don and the miner were one and the same person, and he had made this discovery known one night when the two sat talking together, though he had not stated how he found it out, but left it to be believed that his wonderful reading of human nature and memory of a face was the only means he had used.

The Don was not long in making a discovery too, and that was that the landlord felt he had come in disguise to play some bold game, and that he considered his discovery worth something.

He quickly told the landlord that he was willing to take him into his confidence and pay; but, as far as the former was concerned, Bunco learned no more than he then knew, that the Don was the gambler miner, while the latter, the pay, was considerable in his pocket.

When therefore the Don saw Clarice Creighton at the Sinner's Rest, he was more deeply moved, from some mysterious cause, than he had ever been in his life before, and it took him but a short while to put his things in order in his room and depart from the inn.

"I have no time to lose, and I must act at once."

Now the Don had been busy for a long time organizing a few men into a band for some specific and subtle cause.

What it was for even Bunco did not know.

Up in the mountains Bunco had what was termed a ranch, where he raised a few sheep, herded a few cattle and hogs, and had men working land as a farm.

Five men did the work, and they found Bunco good pay, for the Sinner's Rest coined money for its landlord, and though not mining for riches he was growing rich off the mining-camps.

The men whom the Don had gotten together were a hard lot, there were no harder specimens of humanity on the border.

To gamble, to rob a mine or to cut a throat, was just in the line of these men, and they were willingly enrolled under a leader who promised them gold if they served him, death if they betrayed him.

They loved gold, and they hated to die, though they would risk life to get it, and so they were willing to obey their leader, when they felt he could enrich them in using them for tools to get riches for himself.

It was the night that Don, the Monté Man had taken his hasty departure from Sinner's Rest, and that had ushered the Black Canary into Saw Dust City, and this band of men were seated in their cabin on the ranch of Bunco the landlord.

They heard a hoof-fall without, and a moment after the Don strode into the cabin.

He nodded as they all arose at his entrance, and calling one of their number aside he entered into an earnest conversation with him.

Then, as abruptly as he had come he departed, and the men were again from under the eye of their stern commander.

Leaving the cabin the Don went on his way alone, following a mountain trail he seemed to know well, until as it grew late he went into a solitary camp, staking his horse out, and wrapping himself in his blanket to seek what rest he could.

It was the next morning that he visited the cabin home of the Trapper Parson, with a result that the reader already knows, and it was late on the evening of that day that Sol, the boy guide led the Black Canary up to the little home and found it deserted.

It was a surprise to the boy, for he had expected certainly to find the Trapper Parson there, and certainly the Wild Rose, his grandchild.

But both were gone, the door was open and there was every indication that there had been foul play in their leaving, or at least a very hasty departure.

"Thar's suthin' wrong here, miss, for both the

old trapper and ther pretty Wild Rose hev gone, and yer can see fer yerself things hain't right," said Sol.

"Yes, it does look suspicious; but do you think harm has befallen them?"

"Thar's no tellin', miss, for this is a wild country, an' ther peoples is wilder than wolves and twice as savage."

"And what do you think has happened, Sol?" asked the Black Canary, anxiously.

"It kinder looks ter me as ef ther Wild Rose hed been bagged fer game, an' ther old parson has lighted out in pursuit; but we'll stay here, miss, for thar's no better we kin find, and ef ther parson and Wild Rose sh'u'd come in, and I be mistook, they'll be glad ter see us, thet's sart'in."

Clarice Creighton felt that her boy guide knew best, and so she let him lead her horse away with Red Eye, and shortly after he came in and coolly set to work to make a fire and prepare supper.

Looping her skirt up about her waist, Clarice Creighton aided Sol in preparing supper, and the two really enjoyed their meal together, though they felt anxious regarding the owners of the deserted cabin.

"Thar's ther room o' ther Wild Rose, miss, you kin hang up in, and I'll jist spread out here afore ther fire," said Sol, as it began to grow late.

"Hark! there they come now," said Clarice, as steps were heard without, and Sol stepped quickly to the door to suddenly start back as half a dozen men sprung into the room, one of them crying out:

"Come, pards; here's our game we's lookin' fer— Hold, youngster; up with them hands, quick!"

The answer was the crack of Sol's revolver.

CHAPTER XVI.

KIDNAPPED.

THEY were a rough-looking set who entered the old Trapper Parson's cabin, and surprised the boy guide and the Black Canary.

The words of the man who first entered showed that the two who had been tracking Don, the Monté Man, had themselves been tracked.

But Sol was not readily thrown off his calm pose, and he saw in those who entered only a set of men who meant them no good.

If he could beat them off, so much the better, and as they declared hostility by word, he would do so by act.

Once they were out of the cabin, and he could bar the door, he hoped to hold them at bay, and perhaps drive them off.

So Sol, with a dexterity that many a border-man had envied him, drew his revolver and fired upon the one who had declared the Black Canary and himself their game, and ordered him to hold up his hands.

Sol was a dead shot, and he hit where he aimed, the heart of the ruffian.

With a groan the man dropped in his tracks, and his comrades stampeded with amazing alacrity.

Springing to the door Sol hastily closed it, and called to Clarice to hand him the bar; but before he could adjust it in its place, there was a hard push from without and a man's leg was thrust within.

It was sure to be followed by a body, Sol knew, so he quickly drew his knife and dug down into the leg.

A wild yell of agony and the leg was withdrawn, and the door closed, and the bar was almost in place, when a violent shove came from without, that threw Sol and Clarice almost down.

But Sol had his revolver out in an instant, and sent several bullets in rapid succession through the thick door.

"Somebody's hurt out thar, miss, and we is fixed," he cried, as he now got the bar in place, for the men outside quickly scampered out of range.

"It is strange they do not fire back at you," said Clarice, who was perfectly cool.

"They don't want ter kill, they wants ter take us," was the reply.

"And what will they do now?" asked the woman.

"They'll camp outside until we come out, or they are driven off by somebody."

"Not a pleasant prospect."

"Not adzactly, miss."

"And what are we to do?"

"Take it quiet."

"What do you think is their motive?"

"Oh, they was trailin' us."

"But why?"

"Maybe they thinks you has money, and wants it."

"Then they are men from some of the mines?"

"Guess so, miss. I'd ask this feller, but he won't answer," and Sol pointed to the man he had slain.

"Maybe he is not dead," she said in a whisper.

"Oh yes, he's dead, for my weapon throws an uncommon ball, miss—see!" and he turned the body over, glancing into the face.

Sol was right; the man was dead.

"I think I has seen him afore, miss, but then I hain't sure, fer what with red shirts, slouch hats, long hair, scraggly beard and plenty o' dirt, them fellers looks pretty much alike."

"Hark!" and as Clarice spoke a step was heard without, and then came a knock.

"What's wanted?" asked Sol.

"Who is within thar?" asked a gruff voice.

"Ther Black Canary and Old Nick's Kid," replied the boy.

"We want you."

"Then come in and take us."

"Open the door and surrender, and we will not do you any harm."

"You open ther door and come in and we'll harm you."

"Boy, I know you, and I tell you all I wish is to ask the lady some questions."

"Ask her, then."

"No, I wish to see her privately."

"I do not care to see you," said Clarice, firmly.

"We will wait here until you has ter come out."

"All right; we has plenty ter eat fer a month, so you'll have a long wait."

"Boy, I'll burn you out," came the savage response.

"Now he's talkin', miss," whispered Sol.

"Does he mean it?"

"Yes, miss, them men means everything they says, and it won't be right fer us ter let 'em burn ther parson's home."

"What can we do?" asked the woman, anxiously.

"I'll see ef we kin make tarms with 'em," and raising his voice, Sol called out:

"Hello, pard!"

"What is it?" gruffly asked the voice outside.

"What does you want with us?"

"We wants ter have yer come out, or git burned out."

"Does yer mean ter rob us?"

"No."

"Does yer mean ter kill us?"

"No."

"What then?"

"We wants ter know jist why that leddy come inter this country."

"If I answer, you will let us go?" asked Clarice.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Open the door, Sol, for we can do nothing," she said, in a firm way, as though she had made up her mind to face the worst.

Sol took down the bar and stepped one side, and two men entered.

"Whar's ther rest?" asked Sol, still keeping his hand on his revolver.

"They's outside, and don't you furgit it, boy, and two of 'em is awful hot ag'in' you, fer you shot one in the arm and stuck your knife in t'other's leg."

Sol laughed, while the man turned to Clarice Creighton, and asked:

"What is your name, m'am?"

"Clarice Creighton," she answered, quietly.

"What fetches you into these parts?"

"To find one whom I have sought for years."

"Does you mind givin' his name?"

"Carter Creighton."

"A brother, maybe, or your husband?"

"That is none of your business," was the prompt reply.

"Well, m'am, you is just the one we wants, and boy, if you looks yonder at that window my pard jest opened, you'll see you is covered, so jist drop them weepens o' yourn purty quick!"

"I knows a gun when I sees it, without bein' interdoosed," coolly said Sol, as he glanced to the window, and saw that he was covered by the muzzles of two rifles, and he at once held up his hands.

In an instant he was disarmed and his hands bound behind him, while their captor, turning to his comrade in the cabin, said:

"You better start them two wounded fellers back ter camp along with Sam, for three of us will do ter take these folks whar we is going."

"And we must bury Doc fu'st."

"Yes, and lose no time about it, fer I wants ter be far from here ag'in' sun-up."

The body of the dead ruffian was dragged out of the cabin and quickly buried, and then the one who had acted as spokesman, and who was the leader, said:

"Now, I has ter blindfold yer, m'am, and tie yer hands, too."

Clarice stepped back, indignantly, but Sol said:

"Don't resist 'em, miss, fer it will only be worse fer you."

So she submitted to having her hands securely bound, but asked:

"And why blindfold me?"

"All of ther party hes ter be, 'ceptin' me, fer I leads," was the answer.

He took out of his pocket as he spoke a cloth mask, which fitted closely over the face, and fastened so firmly that there was no possibility of her seeing.

Then he blindfolded Sol, and the two were soon after led out of the cabin.

Two men, those whom Sol had wounded with his knife and the bullet through the door, were just riding away, in company with a comrade to look after them, while two others stood near, holding their own horses, their leader's, a pack-animal and the two which Black Canary and Sol had ridden.

"Now, pards, yer must put yer masks on," said the leader, and he tied over the face of each of his comrades a black cloth mask, similar to the one he had put upon the woman and the boy.

"This is a leetle hard luck, pard," said one of the men.

"If you don't like it, you kin jump on yer horse and ride arter Sam, telling him ter come back, while you go on with ther wounded boys."

"No, I'll stand it, only I hates not ter see whar I is goin'."

"That is jist why I puts this mask on yer," was the reply of the leader.

Then he aided Clarice to mount, and also Sol, for, bound as they were, and wholly blindfolded, they could not help themselves.

Next the two masked men of the band mounted, and locking the door of the cabin, the leader mounted himself, and handed to one of the men the rein of the pack-horse, and to another the lariat attached to Red Eye, while he rode by the side of Clarice himself, taking the lead.

At a trot the party then set off, taking a trail that led them over the mountains, and by dawn they were far away upon their journey, only one knowing where their destination lay, and that one, the leader, giving no hint as to where they were going.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CAPTURE.

THE Silver Circle which had been taken from the wrist of the unfortunate victim of the hatred of some one unknown, proved that he was one who had belonged to some mysterious order which seemed to carry out the motto on the metal band, that death alone can end the tie.

This finding of a second victim, bound, his horse hopped, and turned loose to become the prey of wolves, set Buffalo Bill, the trapper and Toby to thinking, and they held a long talk as to just what it all meant.

"There is, in my mind, a band of men in these mountains united from some peculiar cause, and whose interest it is to keep all others away, and hence their acts to frighten those who might come here."

"That they are in deadly earnest to keep their secret hidden, is proven by the fact that two of their number have been sacrificed to the wolves."

"Now your grandchild, person, may be with this band, for here you tracked her, and the man who kidnapped her; but that we must find out, and we will, and my idea is that by capturing the horse and the dog, is our best plan to start with."

"So, Toby, go back to your post, and should you again see a horseman, looking like a ghost, run to him, not from him, and you may save him from the wolves," and Buffalo Bill turned to Toby, who gathered up his rifle and blanket, and, returning to his post of duty once more stood on guard, while the parson and the scout soon after retired to rest.

But, trained to awaken at any given time, Buffalo Bill was awake at the hour to relieve the soldier and went to the post.

"Anything moving about, Toby?" he asked.

"No, sah, only wolves, and they is ravin' distracted this night, and I guess they has eat up that horse, bones and all."

"I am glad they did not have a feast on human flesh, too; but now, go to rest, and I'll stand the night out, so don't disturb the old parson, as I notice he puts on his best licks of sleep just before dawn."

"Yas, sah; but he do seem to keer precious leetle for sleep anyhow."

And Toby started for camp, leaving Buffalo Bill on duty as a sentinel.

Standing in the shadow of a tree and resting against it, the scout was as motionless as a statue of marble.

But, though he was lost in deep thought, his ears were open to the slightest sound and his eyes swept the moonlit space about him constantly, for mechanically he seemed to see and hear, so thorough had been his training as a plainsman.

Suddenly he started; his attitude was that of listening:

"It is the horse and his dog pard," he said, as the beat of hoofs reached his ears.

Then the sound ceased, wild howls were heard, a loud and savage barking, the neighing of a horse and the yelps of half a hundred wolves.

Like a deer Buffalo Bill sped toward the scene, his repeating rifle in hand, and in a few moments he came upon a strange sight.

Against a wall of rock was the dog at bay springing upon any wolf that approached him, and by his side, his heels pointed outward, his head pointed toward the rock, was the superb white horse.

About them were a half-hundred wolves, ravenous after their feast in the early night, and preparing to rush upon the two Dumb Pards.

Such an unequal struggle could end but one way, and Buffalo Bill went to the rescue with a will to do good work.

As he dashed out of the shadow of the pine thicket he began to "pump" the bullets out of his repeating rifle, and every shot dropped a wolf.

When the click announced that the rifle was empty he drew a revolver in each hand, and these too rattled forth lively music as the frightened wolves darted away, leaving a number of the pack dead upon the scene.

The moment his weapons were empty, the scout halted and began to hastily reload, at the same time gazing intently at the Dumb Pards.

These two seemed to realize that they had met a friend, and they gazed at the scout intently, as he stood some fifty feet distant.

Then, as if to thank him, they gave vent to a neigh and a yelp and darted away.

In vain did he call after them, for they heeded not, and he said aloud:

"Now to give chase, and then get back to the ravine and head them off, for they are sure to follow the old trail."

As he spoke he saw the trapper and Toby coming on horseback, and leading his faithful animal.

They had heard the rattle of the firearms and had quickly come to the support of the daring scout.

"Parson, you ride on in chase of the horse and the dog, and after they run toward the trail that breaks at the river, return with all haste to our camp, where we will go and have all ready to meet them as they land and lariat them," said Buffalo Bill, taking no time for explanation.

Afar off the white horse was still in sight, dashing along, and the trapper started in chase, while Buffalo Bill himself returned quickly to the camp.

In a short while they had hitched their horses, and were mounted upon the top of the rocks, which formed the narrow ravine, or chasm, leading to the landing.

There were stunted pines growing there, and to these the ends of their lariats were made fast, as also that of the Hermit Trapper, so that all would be ready immediately on the latter's return.

"You take the dog, Toby, and you can soon choke him quiet, when we can tie him to a tree and tame him."

"I will take the horse, and I will drop the loop over him quietly from here, for I do not wish him to hurt himself against the rocks."

"Once he is choked down we can tie him, too, and try the taming process."

"If either of us fail to catch our game, the parson can come in on the home-stretch, so we are sure to get them."

Such was the scout's explanation, and then they stood in waiting.

Soon there came the echo of hoofs and the trapper dashed up to the camp in the rear, hitched his horse and quickly came up to the top of the rocks.

"Well?" said the scout, interrogatively.

"They made the leap as usual, Buffalo Bill," the other responded.

"Then we have little time to wait."

"There is your lariat, parson, fast to that tree, and if Toby or I fail to catch our game, then you drop your coil."

"If we do catch on, then your lariat will come in well to help one of us, or both."

"All right, Buffalo Bill," said the trapper, and he took his stand further along on the rocks, and held his coiled lasso in hand.

Soon a splashing sound was heard some hundred feet away, and a moment after, peering through the branches of the pine tree that shielded him, Buffalo Bill saw the dog trot into view, and then came the horse.

"Ready!"

He whispered the word, and all was then as still as death, each of the three men standing ready, lasso in hand, and with their eyes fixed upon the two Dumb Pards seen in the ravine below.

Nearer and nearer they came, the huge dog some twenty feet in advance, and both going at a slow pace, while the water dripped from them.

"Now!"

With the word from Buffalo Bill, his lariat and that of Toby fell upon the animals below.

Squarely over their heads they went, and were then drawn taut with such rapidity that neither the horse or the dog had the chance to make much of a spring, and this was especially satisfactory as regarded the horse, who was brought to a halt before he had an opportunity of bounding away to be brought up with a shock that might have harmed him in some way.

"They are ours!" cried Buffalo Bill, exultantly, as he saw that at last the Dumb Pards were in his power.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CUNNING CAPTIVES.

WHEN the old trapper saw that Toby had secured the dog all right, and Buffalo Bill had the horse in his coil, he skillfully threw his lasso

over the fore feet of the animal, as he reared, and he was at once brought to terms, for the noose had tightened about his throat and was choking off his breath.

"Hold him well, parson, while I slip down and secure him," cried the scout, and he was soon in the ravine and had the lassoes firmly binding the noble animal.

He then turned him over to the parson, who had also come down into the chasm, and went to help Toby, who kept the dog half-suspended, so as to place him beyond resistance.

The dog was also secured, and both animals were led around to the camp, where the captive horse was lariatd out between two lassoes, giving him just the slightest amount of freedom.

The dog was also tied in the same way, between two trees, and feeling that they were secure the trio of strange comrades took from the back of the white steed a pack-saddle which he had firmly strapped there.

In each ear of the horse hung a ring of silver, which marked him at once as having some connection with the mystery of the Silver Circle, while about the neck of the dog was a collar of the same precious metal, welded on, as had been the bands upon the wrists of the two victims of the wolves.

"You didn't see if there was a motto on the dog's collar, did you, Toby?" asked the scout, as he took the pack-saddle toward the camp-fire among the rocks.

"No, sah; I didn't, for I wasn't 'zam'nin' thet dog's collar too close, as all I wanted ter do was ter git him tied afore he come to fer bitin' work."

"I tell yer, Massa Bufler, thet dog are big as a bear and stronger than a lion."

"He is a bad dog, Toby, and I am very glad we were able to secure him as we did."

"He came back to his senses mighty quick arter we got him tied and quit chokin' him."

"Yes; he is a dangerous brute, and that horse was vicious, Buffalo Bill, and but for his knowing we had him bound, muzzled and hopped he would have fought like a wolf," the trapper remarked, as they reached the camp-fire and sat down before it, the scout placing the pack-saddle in the glare of the light to see what it contained.

"Ah! this tells a secret," he said, as he drew out from a leather pouch in front of the saddle a slip of paper.

It bore no address, but simply was an order for ammunition, provisions and half a dozen miner's picks without handles.

At the end was the line:

"Do not forget to send papers and some books."

There was no signature, but a well-drawn circle instead.

"Ah! that is a carrier steed, and thus much of the secret is solved," said the scout, as he opened the leather flaps of the pack-saddle.

But the pouches were empty and nothing more could be discovered to give a clew to just who the horse had come from and where he was going.

"What do you make of it, Buffalo Bill?" asked the trapper, as the scout had completed his search.

"That these Dumb Pards are most thoroughly trained, the one a guide and guard, the other a carrier steed, and they belong to those who are united by this mystic silver band or circle."

"And can you make out just what it all means?" eagerly asked the trapper.

"That a band of men, how many I cannot of course even guess at now, are hiding in these mountains for some purpose of their own, and that they have allies in the settlements this paper proves, for it is a direct order for some one to send back these things, and the horse is to be the bearer," said the scout.

"That looks like gossip, Massa Bill," Toby said.

"It seems the only solution to me, and my idea is to mount that horse and let him carry me to this secret camp."

"Will he do it, Buffalo Bill?"

"I think so; but if not, we can hopple both the horse and the dog, so that we can follow them at a distance."

"Yes, we can do that."

"But perhaps the best way would be to begin in the settlement."

"How do you mean?"

"To find out where the dog and horse go."

"It must be Saw Dust City!"

"Yes, doubtless, and if I can find out who is the ally there, I can force him to reveal what I would know, and, if this mountain band are numerous, I can get a force from the fort to whip them out."

"You are right, Buffalo Bill; the starting point to solve this mystery will be in the camp to which the dog and the horse are sent."

"Yes, parson, I think so; but in the morning we will see just what we can do with those Dumb Pards; but now, as we all need rest we will seek it, for we only have a couple of hours before dawn, and, as we have caught our game, there will be no need of keeping guard," and the scout sought his blankets, while the others followed his example, for they were all pretty well tired out.

Their horses were little more than a lariat's-length away, and in the bright moonlight lay the white steed, held by a lariat upon either side of him, drawn taut.

In the shadow between two trees, was the dog, crouching down, as though asleep, and also held by two lines.

But before lying down to rest it would have been well for the scout to have taken a glance at his dumb captives, for the dog was by no means asleep, but quietly gnawing at one of the lassoes fastened into his silver collar.

He seemed to be asleep, crouched upon the ground, and his head bent to one side; but the lasso was in his mouth, and the sharp teeth were slowly cutting the strands.

Every fall of a leaf, every sound caused him to be on the alert, and he was cunning and cautious as an Indian captive trying to make his escape.

At last the lariat parted, and still keeping the same position he began upon the other.

This was soon in twain, and rising he crept slowly toward his dumb pard, who seemed to understand just what was going on.

The horse was lying down, the lariats on either side drawn taut, and an improvised bridle upon his head and about his neck.

But the dog stood close up to him and the gnawing process was begun once more.

He soon had his comrade free, and with a neigh of joy the horse sprung to his feet, while he bounded away after the dog, who was leading the way, yelping with delight.

In an instant Buffalo Bill and his companions were upon their feet, and they caught a glimpse of the Dumb Pards as they disappeared in an adjacent thicket.

"You remain here and watch for their coming, for they will go to the river again."

"I will press them there."

"Get your lariats quick, and be ready," and the scout threw himself on the back of Comrade, without saddle or bridle, and dashed away in pursuit.

He got the white horse in view once more, as he gained an opening, and pressed rapidly on.

The Dumb Pards took the same old trail, and headed straight for the river-bank.

The scout was but a couple of hundred yards away when he saw them go right over into the stream.

"By Heaven! I will follow them!" he said, firmly, and he urged Comrade straight forward to make the leap.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHANGE OF PLOT.

WHEN the scout boldly took the leap in chase of the Dumb Pards, he knew well its risks.

He had neither bridle nor saddle upon his horse, only the lariat, which he had hastily drawn the stake up with, and coiled as he rode along.

But Comrade knew his master well, for they had been pards in many a danger together, and he unhesitatingly took the leap.

Down into the torrent they went with a heavy splash, Buffalo Bill holding his revolvers above his head, to prevent their getting wet.

Comrade went under, even to his head, but came up so quickly the scout did not get wet across his waist, and instantly the current bore them along at a swift pace.

Along by the wall-like banks, rising high above on either side, and going like a mill-race, the horse and scout were borne on.

The white steed was not in sight, though the moon shone with almost sunlike brilliancy.

Keeping his eyes fixed upon the spot where he had landed, the scout watched for the going out of the white steed and the dog.

"Why, could they have been so far ahead of me as to have already landed?" he said, as he did not observe them go ashore.

"Well," he continued, "the parson and Toby will catch them again, and I will not let them be an instant unguarded, for they know as much about cunning as an Indian."

As he headed his horse for the landing, he saw that it was no easy task to make it; but Comrade was a bold swimmer, and his feet soon touched bottom.

"Ha! I see no tracks here, no water-drip, so they have dodged me."

"But where have they gone?"

"I dare not follow, for I might drown Comrade, if not both of us."

"Well, they are shy ones, and I want both that horse and that dog."

So saying the scout rode on up into the chasm, when suddenly, just as he was about to call out to his comrades, he heard a whirring sound, and a lariat settled over his head, and another over the head of his horse.

"Ho, parson, you and Toby have caught the wrong pig by the ear this time," he called out in his blunt way, as the lassoes began to tighten, and instantly came the response from the trapper:

"I beg pardon, Cody, but we did not expect you this way, and in the shadow of the trees did not know you."

"It's all right, parson; but I thought the Dumb Pards had come this way?"

"No, we expected them, where we heard you

land, and seeing a dark horse and rider, we could not believe it was you, so threw our lariats."

"Yes, Massa Bill, it were funny, dat we coteched you, sah."

"Lucky it wasn't no man as was our inemy, or we'd had him sart'in."

"You would indeed, Toby," and Buffalo Bill released the lariats from about himself and horse, and, riding on to the camp, staked Comrade out once more, after which he stood by the fire, which Toby had built up, to dry his clothing.

"So they escaped you, Buffalo Bill?" said the trapper.

"Yes, and yet I followed them close, saw them leap over into the stream and determined to go after them."

"It was a daring act, Buffalo Bill, and might have cost you your life."

"But I knew where the landing was, and knew I could come to camp by the few hundred yards down the stream, much sooner than I could ride back around that rocky ridge by the trail."

"But what became of those noble beasts?"

"That I do not know."

"They did not land."

"No, not here, for I kept my eyes upon the landing-place, as soon as I swept around the bend, and I did not see them come ashore."

"I felt that they were not so far ahead of me, and yet, to have landed and I not see them, it seemed as though they must be."

"So I came ashore, and seeing that the rocks were dry knew that they had not landed."

"But where could they have gone?"

"They have another landing-place, which their cunning made them go to, fearing to be caught here again."

"You do not think they could have drowned?"

"Not they."

"It might be."

"Parson, that couple are wonders, and they know these mountains as wolves do."

"They have been taken over all of these trails by their trainers, and taught them thoroughly, and they will turn up again when we least expect, my word for it; but it is my intention to start off on a new trail to get at the hiding-place of these mountain mysteries."

"I am at your service in all I can do, Cody."

"Me, too, Massa Bufler."

"I know that; but my idea is to begin work in Saw Dust City."

"Ah! you wish to find out who the one is that the horse was sent to?"

"Exactly; and I feel that I can do it."

"Once I have done this, I can start off on a trail that will have an end that I can find, I am sure."

"And you wish us—"

"To return to your mountain camp and remain in hiding so that, if any one is watching our movements, they may think we have left the mountains in fear or disgust."

"You had better ride with me until we cross the river in the valley beyond the mountain range, so that our trail will show that we have gone, after which you can cross above and return to your mountain camp and remain hidden there until my return."

"I will do so, Buffalo Bill, and Toby will be my companion."

And, passing his hand across his forehead, as though in deep meditation, the old trapper continued:

"Buffalo Bill, you have cleared my brain of the madness that was there."

"I still have the same aim in view, and that only—the finding of my lost Wild Rose; but I leave all in your hands and feel that you will be the one to lead me to the end of the trail."

"Now let us be off, for dawn is coming and we must be on our way."

Mounting their horses they rode away, and that night Buffalo Bill camped alone on his way to Saw Dust City, while the trapper and Toby returned to the mountain retreat of the old Hermit Parson.

CHAPTER XX.

SAW DUST CITY IN ITS PRIME.

THE saloon at the Sinner's Rest, in Saw Dust City, was in full blast, and tobacco-smoke arose in a heavy cloud above the heads of half a hundred gamblers, while others, not engaged in playing cards, mostly from the reason that they were dead broke, sat at tables near the bar enjoying themselves in chatting.

Here a joke was told that elicited shouts of laughter, there a man played upon an accordeon, and others sung, while a few leaned against the long bar and drank what suited them best.

The clink of glasses kept up an accompaniment to the untutored music, while the voices of the singers were more in harmony than were the notes of the wheezing accordeon.

A score or more were gambling, and at several tables the stakes were large, drawing about them a number of lookers-on interested in the games of others.

The saloon was an addition to the tavern proper, on one side of it, of one story, with planked walls and roof, and was quite large.

The light came from half a dozen swinging-lamps, over the tables and bar, the latter being ornamented with rows of jugs, on which were painted in red letters the names of the contents.

In front of each jug was a bottle, which held "the same," and these latter had to be frequently filled up, as there was a steady drain upon them, from the one marked, "Whisky" to that marked "Brandy."

It was hinted that the landlord of the Sinner's Rest bought but one kind of liquor, and that bad whisky, and by a process known only to himself, he manufactured from it both rye and bourbon, brandy, gin and rum, while, by diluting alcohol and throwing in some extract of lemon, he made "sherry," which a little black molasses added changed into "old port."

Be this as it may, the barrels under the shelf, which were drawn upon as the jugs went dry, all looked alike, and certainly bore a strong resemblance to whisky casks.

The cigars were cheap and strong, but cost a good deal of money and patience to smoke.

As for the hotel, so called by simple kindness, it was the best in that wild country, and if one got the best, he had no right to complain.

The fare was really not bad, and there were several good rooms in the house, the best of which had been given to Don, the Monté Man, and afterward to the Black Canary, who appeared so mysteriously in the midst of them all, charmed them by her voice, and then disappeared even more mysteriously.

What had become of her had been more than a nine days' wonder, and the denizens of Saw Dust City had kept her memory green.

As she had not reappeared, there was a hunt arranged, and she had been tracked from camp to camp, and thence to the home of the Trapper Parson.

It was found deserted, and there was evidence that there had been a fight there, but with whom could not be discovered.

Where the Trapper Parson, or his daughter, Wild Rose, had gone, no one ever knew, any more than they could find out where the Black Canary and Uncle Solomon, her boy guide, had gone.

They were tracked to the main mountain trail, the Overland stage road, which ran near, but this was the most often traveled highway in the mountains, and all trace was lost there, and the trail had to be given up.

So this but deepened the mystery, as the Trapper Parson and Wild Rose had disappeared too, and certainly the house had not been left as though with the intention of deserting it.

Another mystery arose on these two, and that was that Don, the Monté Man also failed to put in an appearance in Saw Dust City.

His traps were still at the Sinners' Rest Inn, and the landlord said that he kept his room for him, though there were many to assert that he had been foully dealt with, or voluntarily left the mines.

So these mysteries were talked over around the mining-camps, and neither the Monté Man, Black Canary, or Uncle Solomon were forgotten, as time went on, while seldom did a stage come in that the driver was not asked:

"Is thar any one stirrin' up at ther Trapper Parson's cabin?"

The stage trail led by at a point from whence the cabin came in view for quite a while, but at a distance, and the drivers got so that they always looked in that direction.

But the same response had to be made each time:

"Still deserted, pards."

Thus had two years glided by, and Saw Dust City had not solved the mystery of those mysterious disappearances.

The mining-camp had grown some, but there had been no rich leads struck of late, so that few outsiders had been drawn thither with the hope of making a sudden fortune.

There were some who had dug riches out of the earth and gone back home to cast off their miner suit and wild ways, and spend their days in peace and plenty, and others had stepped into their places, with a few additional settlers and thus the settlement had increased a little and the dwellers there hoped some day to see Saw Dust City a famous city of the mountains.

Bunco, the landlord of the Sinner's Rest, was the money-making man of the camp, which had been given the name of Saw Dust City, on account of a saw-mill near, which furnished sawdust for the paving of the streets in the rainy season.

What Bunco's other name was no one knew, or how he received that strange one; certainly it was never given him in baptism.

He was a hard-faced man, clean-shaven, dressed in black, and did not look unlike an itinerant minister.

He had a cynical look, but an obsequious air, and assumed to speak in the dialect of the border.

Beneath his long-tailed black coat he carried a pair of revolvers, and he knew how to use them, as every one was aware who had seen him tried.

With his tavern turning out more than any

one mine, his ranch up in the mountains paying handsomely the landlord of the Sinner's Rest had become the Mogul, as it were, of Saw Dust City.

Those he kept about him as servants were more than that in reality, for his "help" was really a guard, and his inn a citadel, where he could bid defiance almost to the town, supplied as he was with provisions and a young arsenal in the way of arms, he having a room especially for firearms.

As for Saw Dust City proper, it boasted of half a dozen stores, the largest and best of which belonged to Landlord Bunco, and adjoining the hotel, with which it was connected by a board passageway leading into the landlord's private rooms.

It was presided over by a ruffianly-looking man, who answered to the name of Red Tom, both on account of his deadly deeds and his fiery red hair and face.

To aid him in selling the goods, Red Tom had a young man who looked as though he had the consumption, for he was pale-faced and slender, with large, dark, lustrous eyes that were very expressive; in fact he was called Deer-Eye Dick, on account of his eyes, and he was really a very handsome young man.

He devoted himself to his duties, left the store but seldom, and kept aloof from all associates; but he wore a navy six upon each hip, and mild-mannered as he was, he had been known to send a bullet straight through the brain of a ruffian one day who sought to bully him, and had cleared the store on several occasions of men who sought to make trouble.

The other "stores" in Saw Dust City did not pretend to be on a scale with "Bunco's Bonanza Palace," as the store was called; but they all did a good business.

Then there were several other taverns, such as the "Heart's Ease," "Miner's Rest," "Hash Heaven," "Paradise Palace," and of other like cognomens.

Blacksmith shops thrived there, too, a gunsmith, under the name of "The Shootin'-Iron Hospital," did a tremendous business, while a "church" was, so to speak, just getting on its legs, as it was being built on spiles, and had been under course of construction since the foundation of the camp.

The fact was work progressed slowly on this pious structure, as the miners had been waiting for some itinerant preacher to stray that way, when they meant to get up a revival to welcome him, and finish the edifice in a jiffy.

Back from the main street, which went under the name of Gold Brick avenue, the cabins of the miners were situated, grouped about in twos, fours and sixes, while other huts were scattered among the mines, though Saw Dust City was the Mecca toward which the miners made nightly pilgrimages.

With a reverence for the commandment that orders that no work should be done on the seventh day, the miners were wont to knock off from labor wholly on the Sabbath—and devote it to playing cards, drinking and other enjoyments.

Such was Saw Dust City two years after the reader is taken there, when the Monté Man was "King Bee," the Black Canary charmed its rude dwellers with her voice, and the Trapper Parson and his Wild Rose dwelt in the mountains a few miles distant.

It is thither, two years after the mysterious disappearance of those just named, that I would have the reader accompany me one night, and observe a stranger who rode up to the door of the Sinner's Rest, tossed his bridle-rein to a Chinese stable-boy, and entered with the air of one who was "at home" wherever he happened to be.

CHAPTER XXI.

BUFFALO BILL INTRODUCES HIMSELF.

LANDLORD BUNCO happened to come out of his saloon, into his office, just as the horseman rode up.

He saw a tall man, with great broad shoulders, a physique of a Hercules and Apollo combined, and clad in buckskin pants, tucked in cavalry boots, upon which jingled massive spurs, a blue hunting-shirt, a corduroy jacket, under the skirt of which peeped out a pair of revolvers, while a large bowie was visible thrust in his belt in front, and very convenient to his right hand.

A large-brimmed slouch hat was upon his head, looped up upon one side with a gold star.

His face was as handsome as an Adonis, and yet full of manliness, while a dark mustache shaded his resolute mouth, and his dark-brown hair hung in waving masses below his shoulders.

With a quick, firm tread he advanced to the office desk, carrying a repeating-rifle across his arm, and asked in a pleasant way of Room Key Johnny, the clerk, who was a large and powerful fellow, the "bouncer" of the Sinner's Rest:

"Can I strike a camp-ground in your shanty to-night, pard?"

"I guesses so, ef you hain't over pertic'ler an' will bunk in with several other pilgrims," was the surly answer.

"Well, I am a trifle particular, and wish a

room alone, and that says so," and he tossed a gold twenty-dollar piece upon the desk.

"You can't have no room all alone, even if yer does plank down yer gold," said Room Key Johnny.

"You know best, pard, as to what you can do, while I know there is no law against my looking elsewhere."

"Hold on, pard, maybe we kin fix you, for you looks like a gent as was used ter ther best," and Bunco stepped forward.

"I have had the best and the worst, my friend; but medium will do me just now as I am a long way from home, only don't put me in the pig-pen, or in jail, and let me pick my company," said the visitor, in an off-hand way that was natural to him.

"I'll give him the Don's room, Johnny," said the landlord.

"There, Johnny, the cut of your face told me you were playing it on me about not having a room," and turning to Bunco he continued:

"I thank you, sir, and I may be some days with you, as I have come here on a prospecting trip, and am hungry as a bear, so if you have anything left over from supper I would be delighted."

"You shall have a good supper, sir; but will you write your name on the register?"

"Give me your autograph album, Johnny," said the stranger, and as the huge clerk threw the register down, he seized a pen and hastily and skillfully sketched a Buffalo, after which he wrote the name "Bill," following it with the letters "U. S. A."

The clerk glanced at it, and said in his sulky way:

"This hain't no sketch-book ter paint in."

"Anything to please you, Johnny," was the cool response, and with a quick movement of his hand Buffalo Bill tore the leaf from the book.

"Hold on thar! you'll get bounced, young feller," cried Room Key Johnny, and he leant over and grasped the arm of the scout in his big hand.

In an instant he staggered back and fell in a corner, sent there by a blow from the scout's fist, planted directly between the eyes.

"Hands off, Johnny," said the scout, and he stood his ground as the clerk slowly arose, his face bleeding from the stinging blow.

Bunco had merely stepped to the door of the dining-room to order supper, so had seen and heard all, and he felt that the clerk had provoked it, while he was surprised at the easy manner in which the stranger had sent him to earth.

He knew that the large man, who had the boyish name of "Johnny," with the prefix of Room Key, on account of his wearing a bunch of keys at his belt, was a most dangerous man to offend, and he felt there would be trouble.

He had engaged "Johnny" on account of his great muscular strength, and his bulldog courage, which was mixed with a great deal of bravado.

In fact the clerk was most awe-inspiring to the frequenters of the Sinner's Rest, and was the right man in the right place.

Of his antecedents nothing was known, or cared.

He wrote a good hand, kept the books correctly, made a good clerk, an excellent "bouncer," and was a power in the tavern against servants and guests alike, who did not care to conform to the slight discipline of the establishment.

He had glanced at Buffalo Bill on entering, and determined to make him feel his importance.

He had "tried it on," to use a slang of the camps, and had gone headlong into the corner for his pains.

He rose slowly, amazed, dazed and livid with fury.

He arose with his hand upon a revolver; but before Bunco could interfere, the scout sprung over the railing into the office, and the revolver he held in his hand covered the burly clerk before he had time to draw his weapon.

"Don't get sassy, Johnny, but put up that iron!" came the low command.

"You've got me under cover," growled the clerk.

"And, Johnny, I don't wish any funny business from you."

"I came here in peace, to stop a few days and enjoy myself, and I don't wish to have to declare war, for if I do, the coroner will have to sit on you, sure."

"Let us be friendly and I'll stand the wine, as soon as I have had a bit to eat, and maybe you can make a few dollars out of me."

"What do you say, shall it be peace or war?"

Johnny was a strategist, and he saw that it was necessary for him to say peace, so he said:

"All right, pard, I don't want no trouble with yer, and so I declar' ther game atween us off, and thar's my hand on it."

"Sensible Johnny! now we can be friends—What, landlord, have you been looking on at our merrymaking?" and Buffalo Bill turned to Bunco.

"Yas, I seen it all, and I do say it is the first time I ever seen my clerk hedge."

"Your clerk has a great big head, landlord, and I like him, so we are to be friends; but how about that little supper, for I hav'n't had the photograph of a meal all day."

"It's ready, so come in."

"See you later, Johnny," said Buffalo Bill, and he strode toward the dining-room after his host, though his head was slightly turned and out of the corner of his eye he saw the clerk, so that a movement of his that was hostile, would have met with quick action on the part of the scout.

Buffalo Bill was delighted with his supper, for Bunco had ordered the best, and he enjoyed a substantial meal, after which he went to the office and the clerk showed him to his room.

"This is a pleasant room, Johnny, but it seems to have been headquarters for some one else."

"Don, the Monté Man had it, and arter he left ther landlord put ther Black Canary inter it, but her stay were short."

"Ah! and who was Don, the Monté Man?"

"A Mexican pilgrim as was a boss on keards, and spent his dust free."

"I see; is he not here now?"

"No, hasn't been for about two year."

"Got rich and left the mines, I suppose?"

"No, he went off one day, ter be gone a short time, and hasn't put in an appearance since."

"Them is his things, yonder, and thet's his pictur'."

"I see; but whose picture is this?"

"Ther Black Canary's, for she left a trunk here, and Bunco found that pictur' in it, so hung it up thar."

"Of course you won't meddle with them things o' ther Don and ther Black Canary for we don't let this room?"

"Oh, no, Johnny, I take only that which is my own; but who was this Black Canary?"

"A gal, or a woman, for she seemed about twenty-five, or so."

"She come here on the stage from Hel'na one day, and Bunk give her this room."

"Then she begun ter sing and she jist made ther water run out o' many a eye among ther boys."

"Whisky tears, I guess."

"Waal, ef they was, they was squar', an' ther boys hoped she'd stay."

"But she came here on ther trail o' some one she called Carter Creighton, and next day she bought a horse, took a boy as a guide, one we called Uncle Solomon, and Nick's Kid, for he was a rare young'un, and off they went ter look up ther feller she was a-huntin' fer."

"Did they find him?"

"They hain't found the'selves, fer nobody in Saw Dust has seen 'em since."

"Lost?"

"Dunno, pard; but they didn't tarn up, and ther boys went on a hunt fer 'em; but all they could find were tha'r trail leadin' to ther cabin o' a old Trapper Parson, and thar had been warm work thar, but nobody knew what; but it were supposed ther road-agents had tackled 'em, fer ther trail from ther cabin went towards ther Overland, and from thar we guessed toward the wild mountain kentry."

Buffalo Bill seemed indifferent, but he heard every word, and casually remarked:

"Maybe the road-agents got the Don with the woman and the boy?"

"I dunno; but ther Don left ther night ther Black Canary arrived."

"Why do you call her the Black Canary, for this picture shows a very lovely face of a white lady?"

"She were dressed in deep black, vail and all, and thet are why ther boys called her black, and she c'u'd outsing a canary bird and give him odds."

"And who was the boy, you say?"

"Give it up, pard, fer he was a young 'un nobody knew anything about."

"He lived by hisself in a haunted cabin on ther ridge, rode a wild mustang thet would fight like a wildcat, and ther boy could shoot ter kill when need be, while he knew every trail around these camps."

"And he was the lady's guide?"

"Yas."

"Well, Johnny, you have quite entertained me, I assure you, and as soon as I have put a little piece of court-plaster on that cut on your face, we will go in and have the best the house affords in the way of something to drink."

"We has champagne, but it's twenty a bottle in dust."

"We'll drink a bottle of that, Johnny, to cement our friendship," answered Buffalo Bill, and having dressed the cut which his fist had made in the man's face, the two went into the saloon together, Room Key Johnny having seemingly forgotten that he had at last met his master.

CHAPTER XXII.

BEATEN AT HIS OWN GAME.

WHEN Room Key Johnny entered the saloon of the Sinner's Rest, many glanced at him, and there the look would have ended; but accompanied by a person like Buffalo Bill a general hum followed the look.

The scout was certainly a most striking look-

ing personage, and he walked to the bar with the air of one who did not know that he was the center of scores of eyes.

"Come, Johnny, you will drink champagne, I believe," he said in his free-and-easy way, and the surprised bartender got out a bottle of that sparkling wine, and set up two tumblers to drink it out of.

Then, a good server of liquors, he was out of his element where champagne was concerned and was going to draw the cork with a corkscrew, when Buffalo Bill said:

"Let me open it, pard."

As the cork flew into the air with a loud report, a dozen men sprung to their feet, for engaged in gambling, and unused to hearing champagne popping at the Sinner's Rest, they thought it was the crack of a revolver.

This centered the eyes of all upon Buffalo Bill, and queries went around as to who he could be, for, though his name was a byword around every camp-fire, he was not personally known among the mining-camps to but few.

A laugh followed the act of those who had sprung to their feet, and unheeding the presence of others the scout touched his glass to that of the clerk, and they drank down the sparkling wine.

Having done this, Johnny led his guest around the saloon, seemingly proud at introducing a stranger who attracted such universal attention.

At length they stopped over by a table where four men were busy in a game for considerable money, and Buffalo Bill took a position by one to which the clerk seemed to direct him.

The man was as large as Room Key Johnny, of a powerful frame, wore a red shirt, black pants, stuck in his boot-tops, and carried four revolvers in his belt, and no knife.

His face was coarse, savage and that of a pronounced ruffian, and he was a successful and dangerous gambler.

When he entered a room and invited men to be his companions in a game of cards, few were wont to decline, some being willing to take the chance of winning, rather than the prospect of offending the solicitor by a refusal, and even were willing to lose rather than quarrel with Iron Grip, as the man was called.

He had come into the mines some years before, and his occupation was gambling, and woe be unto the man he caught cheating him, while he was always wont to say, if he was caught playing a false game he would make no resistance to being shot.

He had caught, or pretended to catch several players cheating him, and after his warning cry of "Look out for Death!" he was wont to draw and fire.

Others were quick with their weapons, too, but somehow Iron Grip always got his revolver leveled first, and he seldom missed his aim.

This was the man by whose side Buffalo Bill had halted, while Johnny went around and stood so as to face him.

Between Johnny and Iron Grip there seemed to be a close friendship, and seeing the clerk the gambler nodded.

He soon after glanced up at Buffalo Bill, and a moment after frowned, threw down a wrong card, and the game went against him.

The next game was also against him, and looking up angrily at the scout, he said:

"Look here, Dandy, git one side, for you give me bad luck, or you is spotting my hand and givin' it ter ther others."

"I will stand one side, yes, for you are not a pleasant brute to be near; but if you say that I would be guilty of giving away to others your hand, you lie!"

The words came cutting, distinct, and all near heard them.

And all expected to see Iron Grip spring upon the scout, whom they were assured could not know who the gambler was, to thus answer him, while Johnny said in a whisper:

"Don't make him mad, pard."

The scout smiled, while strange to say the gambler did not spring upon him, or reply to his remark, but went on with his game.

But greater interest suddenly became centered around that table, as those who knew the gambler, and beheld the scout, felt that perhaps he might resent an insult which the ruffian was sure to give before long.

Again did the gambler lose, and looking up at Buffalo Bill, he said:

"You are a bird of ill-omen, Dandy, and I want you to git, and quick too."

The scout did not change color, as he turned to Room Key Johnny and asked quietly:

"Is there any law against my being here, Johnny?"

"Nary law as I knows on, only when Iron says anything he means it, and I guess you had better git out ter save trouble."

"Pard Johnny, I think I'll stay, and I don't care to be driven out, nor do I intend to be."

A breathless silence followed the words, and all looked at Iron Grip.

He smiled in a way that resembled the grin of a wolf, and, contrary to all expectation, said:

"Pard, you has grit, and I want ter shake yer hand."

Buffalo Bill was never a man to seek trouble. He knew the border as no one else knew it, and he was aware that if he showed fear it would be his death-knell.

Fear he did not know the meaning of, and yet he wished to avoid trouble, for he saw that it was being forced upon him as a stranger, to add to the capital of the man of the Iron Grip.

When, therefore, the gambler held forth his hand, the scout was willing to take it, and there drop the matter, so he grasped the horny hand of the desperado.

It was a mistake, for Iron Grip had sought that opportunity to show his strength, and, without rising, he gave the scout a sudden pull, which, unprepared as he was, nearly drew him upon the table.

Many laughed, and realizing at once the game of the gambler, Buffalo Bill, with a lightning-like rapidity of movement for which he is famous, recovered himself in a second and dealt the man a blow square in the face that staggered him, and caused him to release his grip on the right hand of the scout.

A yell burst from many lips in chorus, for they saw a tragedy ahead, and they wanted just something of that kind to whet their appetites.

Had not Iron Grip been sitting down the blow would have floored him; but he was strong as an ox, and he rose quickly, at the same time trying to get his hand upon one of his revolvers.

Buffalo Bill saw this, however, and he gave him a terrific blow upon the arm that dropped it to his side benumbed, and then, seizing him in a clutch which showed Iron Grip that he was the master, he slapped his face right and left with stinging blows and hurled him into a corner.

Unheeding the yells that arose upon all sides, Buffalo Bill stepped over to the now limp form, for the man was stunned by the blows rained upon him, and disarming him, handed the four revolvers to the bartender with the quiet remark:

"Keep this arsenal for that gentleman, who will doubtless wish to fire off a salute when he feels better."

Then the scout walked quietly from the saloon, followed by ringing cheers, while Room Key Johnny was besieged upon all sides with the question:

"Who is yer pard, Johnny?"

"Durned ef I know," said Johnny, who really had not caught at the scout's name, from the buffalo he had drawn and the four letters he had written after it.

Bunco had been in the saloon and had seen it all, and he was not sorry to see Iron Grip punished, as the terror of the man kept many from playing cards, and the landlord got his percentage upon each game won.

It did not take Iron Grip long to recover his scattered senses, and rising slowly to his feet he passed his huge hand across his eyes, as though striving to recall what had happened.

"What are it, Johnny?" he asked, as he saw the clerk standing near.

"He licked yer, Iron, thet are it," was the reply.

"It's a lie!" he said in a thoughtful kind of way, as though not exactly sure that it was not the truth.

"Waal, he are puttin' up in this hotel, and I kin call him back ef yer wishes ter see him."

Iron Grip cast a hasty glance toward the door, and there was some anxiety in it too; but missing his weapons he said savagely:

"Whar's my guns?"

"He tuk 'em an' giv' 'em ter Rum Charlie," said the clerk alluding to the bartender, who was known by that not inappropriate cognomen.

"Here they is, Iron Grip," sung out Rum Charlie, who was afraid of the desperado even unarmed.

The gambler took them and replaced them in his belt, while Johnny said:

"He said as how yer might wish ter fire off a salute when yer got 'em."

"Ef he comes back, I'll fire a salute, you bet," growled the desperado.

"I'll call him," said Bunco, walking toward the door, and, with a revolver in each hand the gambler stood around the corner of the bar, awaiting the coming of the scout from the hotel entrance.

But Landlord Bunco did not return with his guest, as was expected by all, and hoped by many.

He found the scout in his room, and he went there to have a talk with him, for he realized that he had no ordinary personage for his guest.

"Ab, landlord, come in," said the scout, as he saw Bunco follow his knock.

And Bunco saw that the scout was ready to greet a foe, if such had entered, for his hand was upon his hip.

"I hope I don't intrude, sir," said the landlord in his obsequious way.

"No, indeed, for I am glad to see you, so sit down," and Buffalo Bill motioned to a seat on the other side of the table at which he sat.

Bunco dropped into the seat and said in a flattering way:

"Well, sir, you certainly possess wonderful strength, for you handled Iron Grip easy."

"He should have kept his hands off of me, for I do not like it, and that is why I hit your clerk."

"Yas, and you gave it ter him slick too, while how yer made it up with Johnny I doesn't know, fer he ain't one ter ferrieve and fergit an injury."

"Oh, Johnny's all right, and if your friend Iron Grip is not satisfied he can get more of the same sort, for I keep a supply on hand for just such bullies as he is."

"I guess he don't want any more of that sort, but he's now waitin' for you ter come inter ther saloon and try it on with weepens."

"I shall not seek him, and he must keep out of my way."

"He's a dangerous man with a gun, stranger."

"So am I!"

The words were quietly said, and with not an atom of bravado in them.

They simply were the truth, and the scout knew what he could do, for he had been tried too often.

Bunco read the words as they were meant, and gazing into the face of the man he saw that he was right, for he looked it.

"Waal, pard, yer keep yer eyes open while yer is here, fer Iron Grip will be round when yer least expects it."

"Thank you, landlord, I will take your advice; but I came here to pass a few days, and mostly to see you, and I don't intend to be run off by any one or a dozen desperadoes such as is that ruffian I punished."

"Waal, I'll be glad ter entertain yer as long as yer remains in Saw Dust; but yer hasn't told me yer name?"

"Perhaps this will introduce me?" was the quiet reply, and Buffalo Bill drew up the sleeve of his left arm and revealed a silver band about the wrist.

"*Ther Silver Circle.*"

The cry came in surprise from the lips of the landlord, and he glanced at the silver band, and then at the scout.

"Yes, I see you recognize it," Buffalo Bill said, calmly.

"I sh'ud say so; but is yer straight from the mountains?"

"Yes, I did not tarry long on the way."

"And ther pards?"

"They are all right, and I brought you this little order," and Buffalo Bill handed out the scrap of paper which he had taken from the pouch in the pack-saddle.

"Ah, yes, I'll fill it all right, and suppose you has ther pack-horse with yer?"

"No, I'll have to get one here."

"All right, pard, I kin supply yer, so just say when yer wishes ter go."

"I think I shall start back soon, and—"

A knock upon the door caused the scout to stop in what he was saying and call out:

"Come in!"

As he did so Bunco noticed that his hand again dropped upon his revolver.

Room Key Johnny entered, and said:

"Bunco, ther's a man here from ther mountains ter see yer?"

"Who is he, Johnny?" asked the landlord, who seemed always suspicious when he was wanted.

"I dunno; but he wears ther Silver band badge."

"Ah!" and Bunco hastily left the room, while Buffalo Bill said, calmly:

"Now, I'm in for it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

TWO OF A KIND.

WHEN Landlord Bunco went out of Buffalo Bill's room at the Sinner's Rest to see the person whom his clerk told him had arrived to see him, he found at the office a man whose appearance indicated that he was a miner.

He wore a red flannel shirt, a slouch hat and buckskin leggings tucked into his top-boots.

He carried at his back a rifle and in his belt the two revolvers and bowie without which a miner's outfit was by no means complete.

The man looked jaded, as from a hard trip, and his face was a trifle anxious in expression; but it was stamped from forehead to chin with a look of villainy that no one could mistake, not even the most casual observer of human nature.

As the landlord approached him the stranger said:

"Ho, pard; how are yer?"

"Why, Fanshaw, it's you, is it?" said Bunco, grasping his hand.

"It looks like me, don't it, pard?"

"Yes; you do look nat'ral; but what's up?"

"A heap; so come somewhar and I'll tell yer, fer I hes a letter fer yer."

The landlord led the man into his own quarters and said:

"When did yer leave?"

"Jist sixteen hour ago, and I hes rid hard; but here's a letter for yer."

Bunco took the letter and read it, his face expressing surprise the while, and then he said:

"Fanshaw, I got this order the cap'n sends

fer by his other messenger and were talking to him when you come.

"But what does it mean thet thar is them on yer trail who has been pressin' yer, as ther cap'n says?"

"Waal, thar is them in the mountains as don't skeer easy as other folks, and they is huntin' our trail, and bein' short o' men ther cap'n has writ yer just what he wants yer ter do."

"He don't mean thet I shall find anything in ther mountains 'ceptin' them as he wishes me ter hunt?"

"That's all."

"And then git out?"

"Jest so."

"Waal, it can be did, I guess; but how many men is it thet camps on yer trail up thar?"

"Three."

"Them hain't many."

"They is more than you thinks, pard, fer thar is one as is a holy terror and means business from ther jump, and his pards hain't no slouches, ef one is a nigger."

"A nigger?"

"Fact; and a sojer."

"And who are t'others?"

"Ther old Trapper Parson, and one o' ther men who knows him says ther other is Buf'ler Bill."

"Lor', no!"

"Fact."

"Waal, I doesn't know thet man, but ef he are what they says he is, then he hain't one ter fool with."

"Thet's why I says three are a good many, when he are one."

"Thet's so; but you are sart'in?"

"I tell yer what Jake says, and he were a soldier, yer know, until he deserted, and he knows Buf'ler Bill well, and he seen him."

"What's he doin' thar?"

"Now, pard, he are jist campin' thar fer business."

"I see, and ther cap'n wants him tuk in?"

"Yes, and t'others."

"I see; but he hain't able ter do it himself?"

"He hes other work fer ther men."

"I see; waal, I guess I kin fix it; but one o' your men are already here."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know his name, Fanshaw, but he come early in ther evening, and he has made himself quite at home, fer he licked Room Key Johnny, my clerk, and cleaned out Iron Grip in ther neatest style."

"Ther Old Nick yer says! But who is he?"

"I don't know, but I guess you kin place him when yer sees him."

"You bet; but if he's one of our men he hev skipped while on duty."

"No, he brought thet same order from ther cap'n that you hes, though no letter."

"Pard, thar is some mistake about this, and I guesses you hes been tuk in."

"I guess not, fer he wears the Silver Circle."

"Then he are O. K.; but whar is he?"

"In his room, whar I was talking to him when you come."

"And he hes cleaned out Johnny and ther Iron Grip?"

"Well, he did, most beautifully, and I wasn't sorry in either case."

"Ther fact is, Room Key feels his importance, and he jist puts on airs when strangers come, and he did su'thin' Silver Circle didn't like, and all of a sudden I seen Johnny flying backward inter a corner."

"But ther stranger made it up with him, though it are my opinion Johnny hes got it in fer him, and they hed a bottle o' champagne together and then went ter watchin' Iron Grip and some others play."

"I seen Johnny makin' signs ter Iron Grip about ther stranger, and it wasn't long afore ther' was a word or two, and then come an earthquake."

"It was done awful quick, and Iron Grip didn't have no time ter hit or ter draw, and he went down hard, while ther stranger tuk his guns away from him and give 'em ter Rum Charlie, arter which he walked out and come to his room."

"Then Iron Grip got brave and said he wanted ther stranger ter come back, and I come in ter tell him, when I found he were one o' ther Silver Circle."

"Waal, he is a boss; but I can't place him, Bunco, though if he wears ther circle he are all right."

"Waal, we'll go inter his room and see him."

"Done," and the two men arose and went to the room of Buffalo Bill.

But ther knock brought no response, and opening the door with his key, the landlord saw that it was vacant.

CHAPTER XXV.

SILENCED.

SOON after Bunco left Buffalo Bill, to see to the stranger, the scout arose, looked carefully at his weapons and left the room.

He stepped out of the hotel upon the piazza, going by the office, where Room Key Johnny had installed a Chinese in his place for awhile, as he had gone into the saloon.

Glancing through the window, Buffalo Bill

saw Iron Grip coming toward the outer door, and he stood back in the shadow.

As the man stepped out upon the piazza, he turned back, and called out:

"I'll find him yet, pards, and then you'll see a cirkis, I promises you."

Then he banged to the door, and walked toward the steps.

"Git, sir, git lively!"

One glance did the bully cast behind him, and he saw his enemy, with revolver leveled, and with a bound he sprung from the piazza to the ground and dashed down the street, evidently expecting a shot.

With a laugh at the flight of the desperado, Buffalo Bill entered the saloon.

At his coming a hush seemed to fall upon all; but unheeding it, he walked over to a corner and took his seat at a table, his back against the wall, and in such a position that no one could get behind him, while his eyes commanded all in the room.

He seemed interested in a game of cards near, and watched them with the air of a man who had no thought of anything else.

But when Buffalo Bill had discovered there was another man who was wearing the silver circle besides himself, he felt, as he said, that he was "in for it."

If trouble came he meant to meet it half-way, and he desired to be where there were others, and not alone in his own room.

So he sought the saloon where the crowd was, and all was going in full blast.

He expected to find Iron Grip there awaiting him, as the landlord had said, so he went on the piazza to enter from another door that he might not be surprised, but surprise his enemy.

This he had done most satisfactorily, sending the bully flying up the street in fright.

Then he entered the saloon and sought a convenient locality in which to stand at bay if it came to serious trouble.

He knew that all eyes were upon him, and admiringly, after his defeat of Iron Grip, whom physically not one of them present would have faced, though with weapons there were several who would have stood their ground without dread.

Seeing how matters stood and that he might need the aid of some present, he took the sure way to their hearts, for he got up, and approaching the bar said in his off-hand way:

"Gentlemen, I'm so dry I'll catch afire if I don't have a drink."

"Will you not join me, and I mean *all*?"

They arose as one man, and Rum Charlie and his associates had their hands full for ten minutes.

"Your good health, gentlemen."

And the glasses were drained with a crook of the elbow.

Settling his score, the scout resumed his seat and watched the game of cards which had been resumed.

"I must tell yer ter look out for Iron Grip, pard, for he's ugly," said one of the players, turning to him.

"I sent him flying up the street a short while ago, for he came out as I was coming in."

"I guess he's not dangerous, but I thank you all the same," said the scout.

No one asked him more, for he seemed a man not to question closely, but all wished to know.

Presently the door opened and Room Key Johnny came in, and seeing Buffalo Bill took a seat near him.

Not long after the door swung back and Bunco and Fanshaw came in.

The scout saw that they were looking for him, but he merely moved so as to be ready to draw quickly, and then kept his position and an air of absorbed attention in the game.

At a quick glance Buffalo Bill took in the man with the landlord, and then he did not look at him again.

"Does yer know him?" asked Bunco, in a whisper to Fanshaw.

"No."

"Are it Buffalo Bill?"

"I never seen him, so I don't know; but he's a dandy, hain't he?"

"Yes; and dangerous."

"I is more dangerous when I'm set a-goin', pard," was the reply.

"Well, what's ter be done?"

"Why, ef he's an impostor, he's got to be called in."

"I tell you he wears the silver band."

"He didn't come by it squar', for I knows all who belongs ter ther band."

"And yet he brought me ther order thet you did."

"Thar is some false play, Bunco, and he's better dead than alive."

"If he hain't squar', yes, but how's it ter be done?"

"I'll git inter a row with him."

"You knows best."

"And kill him."

"Maybe it could be done better after he goes ter bed ter-night."

"No, I likes ther fun o' a row in public, and it will jist make me a gamecock with ther pards here ter tarn up ther toes o' thet dandified chap."

"He's a gamecock himself."

"Thar's but one gamecock whose spurs I can't clip, Bunco, and that's ther cap'n."

"I is quick as lightnin' on ther draw, death on ther trigger, and I kin handle a grizzly in a rough-and-tumble, while as fer ther knife, yer hes seen me use it."

"I know you is good, Fanshaw, but so is he."

"Thet may be, but I'm better, so here's to success," and the man dashed off a drink, for he and the landlord had been standing at the bar while talking.

"Pard, j'ine me in a game o' keerds, as I wants ter play and you is not engaged, I see," and the man walked up toward Buffalo Bill, who looked up and said quietly:

"I do not care to play to-night, thank you."

"But I does."

"Then play with some one else."

"No, I has picked you out fer a partner, and I wants yer ter play."

"Do you think because I am young and innocent you can cheat me?"

All who had seen Fanshaw approach the scout saw that he had a motive in it, more than a game of cards.

They had seen the scout set upon once before, and they waited developments with interest, while the whole room now had their attention drawn to the two.

Fanshaw was a double-jointed, muscular fellow, with long, heavy arms and legs, and he looked like one who would be very hard to handle physically, while his face indicated recklessness to desperation.

The drink excited him, and he said hotly:

"Before I touches a keerd does you say I'd cheat?"

"If I judge by your face I think you would do anything that was mean," came the response, and still Buffalo Bill did not move from his chair.

The man dropped his hand upon his pistol, but he saw that the scout already had his weapon in his grasp and he said:

"I asked you ter play keerds, but I hain't particular, fer I'd jest as leave treat ther boys to a leetle game o' knock down."

"With bullet or fist?" was the calm query.

"With fists first, and ef you is able ter stand up arter I hes hed yer in my grip, we'll try guns, knives, or what you like."

"I am no bar-room bully or fighter, such as you are, but if you wish to amuse the boys all you have to do is to lay aside your weapons and toe the scratch."

"I'll do it; here, put your weapons thar, gun fer gun," and the man laid a revolver down upon the table, and Buffalo Bill, still seated, did the same.

Then he placed his bowie-knife there, and the scout followed suit.

Next his second revolver followed slowly, though he still kept his hand upon it.

Buffalo Bill instantly placed his second pistol on the table and withdrew his hand, while he said:

"Next!"

"I hain't got no more weepens, for I hain't no armory."

"All right; I am ready for the fun."

"Git up then and come at me," and the man squared himself, fists up, in a way that showed he had been trained in the art of pugilism.

"My dear sir, you said you wished to amuse the gentlemen present, and I am willing to aid you, but you must make the attack."

"Thet's so!"

"He's right!"

"Jump on him!"

"You knock fu't!"

Such were the cries that backed up the words of the scout, and the bully, without waiting for Buffalo Bill to rise, sprung forward and aimed a quick blow at his head.

It was parried, and so well that the man's weight aided the blow he received from the scout, and he went backward with a force that sent him over a table, chairs and several men.

It was unexpected wholly to many, it was appalling so to Fanshaw, who never doubted that his blow would hit the target, the scout's head.

The breath was knocked out of him by the lick he received, and he picked himself up very slowly, while the crowd shouted, and Room Key Johnny sung out:

"You've been kicked by a mule, too, pard."

Fanshaw panted for breath, and his face was white with fury, as he turned and rushed upon the scout, his fists up, his right arm ready for a blow that must kill.

But again was the blow parried, and at the same moment the right fist of Buffalo Bill met the face of his assailant.

The man dropped like a log, his full length, and Buffalo Bill calmly stepped back, as though to go to the table for his belt of arms, when a chorus of voices cried:

"Look out! he's loaded!"

The ruffian had half risen, and thrusting his hand into his boot-leg drew a revolver, at the same time crouching as for a spring upon his foe.

Quicker than a flash, so quick that few saw how it was done, Buffalo Bill drew from his

breast a derringer, and its loud report drowned the crack of Fanshaw's revolver, for both weapons were discharged together.

All in a heap Fanshaw fell, a bullet in the center of his forehead, while Buffalo Bill stepped to the table and resumed his arms, saying calmly:

"I saw that revolver in his boot, so did not lay my derringer on the table."

"Right you are!"

"We had ther fun!"

"He got it squar' atween ther eyes."

Such and many other like remarks were heard on all sides, while Buffalo Bill stepped quickly up to Bunco and said in a whisper:

"What did you let the fool attack me for?"

"Quick, take his body out, and let us get that silver circle from his wrist, for it must not be seen, or we will be ruined."

"Then you is squar' arter all," said the surprised Bunco.

"Do you think the cap'n lets every man of his hand know all his business?"

"Can't he have spies?" was the evasive response.

And Bunco hastily called to Room Key Johnny to help him, and the body of the dead ruffian was borne from the saloon, while Buffalo Bill hastily departed also, refusing the many invitations to "Take su'thin', pard," and followed by the cheers of the wild crowd, who had been won over by his cool courage.

Then again and again the question was asked:

"Pards, who is he?"

But no one could answer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

STRATEGY.

BUNCO, the landlord of the Sinner's Rest, was in a quandary.

He had certainly believed in Buffalo Bill being connected with the mysterious members of the Silver Circle until the coming of Fanshaw put the idea out of his head.

He knew Fanshaw, and there was no doubt of him.

But then the suspicion cast upon the scout by Fanshaw caused Bunco to doubt him.

If he was playing a part, it certainly was a bold one.

He wore the Silver Circle upon his wrist, and more, he had come straight to him.

He had seemed to know of the existence of the band and their locality in the mountains, while he had brought an order in a handwriting which Bunco recognized for just the things he knew were wanted.

They had been getting along all right until the coming of Fanshaw, and then doubts crossed the mind of Bunco.

Fanshaw had said there were three men on the track of the mystery of the Silver Circle, and that one of those men was Buffalo Bill.

He was known far and wide as the best Indian fighter on the plains, he had followed trails which red-skins had given up, and he was a terror to road-agents and evil doers.

Living in the army camps he was not often seen among the mines, and yet there were none who had not heard of him.

Fanshaw did not know him by sight, but one of his comrades did, and recognizing him as one of the trailing trio in the mountains, he feared that the stranger might prove to be the scout.

Nor was he wrong; but then, when he saw the tall, graceful, handsome man he could not believe that it could be the renowned Buffalo Bill, and he at once began a system of bullying.

If he knew the secrets of the Silver Circle, as he deemed he did, he felt that the man before him, although he wore the silver band about his wrist, was not one of the league.

So he set to work to entrap the scout into a difficulty and kill him.

The reader has seen that the biter got bitten, and Bunco was in almost despair at what to do, when Buffalo Bill came to his side and whispered to him not to let the Silver Circle on the wrist of Fanshaw be seen.

This caused him to feel that Fanshaw had made a mistake, and the other words of the scout almost convinced him of it, and so he bore the body of the dead man into an empty room, Room Key Johnny aiding him.

Then the clerk was left on guard, while Bunco sought Buffalo Bill in his room.

"Say, pard, I guess that was a mistake Fanshaw made?" he said, inquiringly.

"It seems so," was the quiet reply.

"He thought at first you might be Buffalo Bill."

"Why didn't you tell him to the contrary?"

"The fact is I didn't know."

"You might have known Buffalo Bill would never wear the Silver Circle."

"Thet's so, and you does?"

"You see it for yourself."

"Fanshaw was too hasty."

"My idea is that he was not hasty enough on the draw," came the laconic response.

"Fact; but you hes more lightnin' than I ever seen in a man afore."

"One has to be quick, living as I do in daily danger."

"And so you is ther cap'n's spy?"

"Yes, I am a spy, and I hope no more of the band will make a mistake such as Fanshaw."

"You sh'u'd hev told him who you was."

"I think not, for you told him I wore the Silver Circle, and he picked a quarrel with me to amuse the crowd and win glory for himself, and I allowed him to do it."

"Had he not played false in putting his weapons on the table, I would have put my derringer there; but I saw him hold back the revolver in his boot, and when I said 'Next,' he said that was all, so I kept my little gun, and it is well I did."

"It would have been better for him, had he taken his knock-down and departed, and not rushed upon sudden death as he did."

"You is right, pard."

"Did you secure the Silver Circle?"

"Johnny is guarding the body, ter keep folks out, and I has sent for a file ter git it off."

"When you do I want it."

"You wants it?"

"Yes; he was my game, and I wish to take it back with me, and make my report."

"As it is, I will trouble you to get that order ready to-night, for I shall start at dawn, and it is now nearly eleven o'clock."

"The store is closed, and—"

"Open it, for I leave by sunrise."

"Pard, I don't think I can git ther things together by sun-up."

"All right, do the best you can, and procure a pack-saddle, too."

"And a horse?"

"I shall take Fanshaw's horse."

"I can find yer a finer pack-animal than he'll be."

"I will take Fanshaw's horse, his weapons and all, back to the mountains," was the decided reply, and Bunco knew that his guest was in earnest.

As if to convince him, for he feared trickery, Buffalo Bill said:

"I will go out to the stable now and see that a man takes good care of the horses to-night."

"Oh, I'll see to that."

"I prefer to see to it myself," and Buffalo Bill left his room and sought the stable adjoining the Sinner's Rest.

A man was there, and he seemed sullen, until a gold-piece was dropped into his hand, when he brightened up.

"Which is the horse that the man from the mountains rode in to-night?" he asked.

"That white horse yonder, pardner."

"Ah, a fine-looking animal," and the scout admired his good points as the man held the lantern.

"Yes, he's all a man c'u'd want in horseflesh; but he fetched his rider to ther wrong camp this night."

"Why?"

"He's been kilt."

"Ah, yes; I see."

"Did you see ther row?"

"I killed the gentleman," was the reply.

The stableman started and gazed with admiration upon his visitor.

He had not been on duty when the scout came in and so had not seen him.

"Waal, theysay you is chained lightnin', mister," he said, earnestly.

"Well, my man, yonder is my horse, and the white animal goes with me, too, so just spend your time rubbing them down, and I'll give you the mate of the gold-piece I just handed you."

"I'll do it, mister, fer I likes your style."

"And find me a pack-saddle for the white, and keep the saddle that belongs on him until it is called for."

"I'll do as you says, mister," called out the man, as Buffalo Bill returned to the hotel.

He went straight to the room where the body of the dead man was lying and knocked.

"Yer can't come in," sung out Bunco.

"You know who I am, so let me in," said the scout.

"No, nobody kin come in here to distarb the dead," Room Key Johnny replied.

"I do not wish to disturb the dead, but I desire to come in, for I have business with you," was the firm reply.

"I'll see you later."

"I'll see you now."

And throwing his weight against the door Buffalo Bill entered with a bound.

It was no use for Johnny and Bunco to drop their hands upon their revolvers, for he had them both covered, and the latter sung out:

"Why, pard, is it you?"

"Yas; we didn't know yer," echoed Johnny.

"Yer sh'u'd hev told us who yer was," Bunco said.

Buffalo Bill smiled, closed the door and put a chair against it, while he said:

"Come, pards, you knew who it was, only you wanted to get the gold-dust off the body before you let me in."

"He has considerable, has he not?"

"Yas; he has got a good load o' yaller metal, and I were going ter put it away fer ther cap'n," Bunco remarked, blandly.

"You forget that I am his heir, Bunco, and I

will trouble you for that pouch of gold-dust, and it shall go where it belongs."

"Waal, you knows best, pard."

And three buckskin bags of gold-dust were handed over.

"And the Silver Circle?" said the scout.

"Yes; you've got that, Johnny."

The clerk reluctantly drew it from his capacious pocket, he having filed it from the dead man's wrist.

"Thank you," and the scout placed it in one of the buckskin bags.

"Now, Bunco, I've determined to leave at sunrise, and you must get those things ready."

"I can't do it, pard."

"Your store adjoins your hotel, your clerk is in there, for I just saw him, and he says he can fill any order, and if you refuse I shall get them elsewhere, and report to the captain why I did so."

This seemed to bring the landlord to terms, and he said sullenly:

"Waal, ef yer must have 'em yer must, so I'll do it."

"Johnny, have breakfast for me so I can get off by sunrise, and you had better call me."

"Is yer sich a sound sleeper yer can't wake up?"

"If I tell you yes, don't come in and try to rob me," and Buffalo Bill nodded good-night and went to his room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TREACHERY.

"WELL, I don't like overhauling other folks' things, but I'm doing the work of a detective now, and I must get what clews I can, for this man Bunco is connected with the Silver Circle League, I am now sure, and I wish to find out just what caused the mysterious disappearance of that lady they call the Black Canary and the boy."

"It looks strange that the Don should have left the very day she arrived, and I wish to get the bottom facts of the case, if I can."

So spoke Buffalo Bill when he went into his room for the night.

He arranged his things so as to be ready to make a hasty start, and then looked at the pictures on the wall, the one of Don, the Monte Man, the other of the Black Canary.

He drew the tacks out of the back and took them out of the little frames, muttering as he glanced at the name of the maker:

"Both by the same man—I thought so."

Next he overhauled the luggage of the Don, and seemed to find there something to interest him.

Then he looked at the things left by Clarice Creighton, and which were in a closet, where Bunco had placed them upon taking them from her trunk.

Here, too, he seemed to find something of interest, and apparently satisfied, he said:

"Now to get what sleep I can."

While the scout was making his arrangements to retire, a man was seated alone in the office without.

It was Room Key Johnny, and he seemed anxious, as though he expected some one, from the way he constantly watched the door.

Bunco had gone into his room, some time before, and thence into his store to pack up the things that the order he had received called for, and Johnny, after closing the door in which lay the body of the dead man, had called up a Chinese servant and sent him off on an errand.

Soon the Chinese returned, and the clerk asked quickly:

"Did yer see him?"

"Yes, me see him ee allee samee."

"Is he coming?"

"He comees puttee quickee."

"Now you get ter bed, and keep that yaller trap o' yourn closed, ef you is axed any questions ter-morrer."

"Me keepee trapee close tightee," and the Chinese disappeared.

"I wish he'd come," said Johnny to himself soon after, and, as he uttered the words the front door of the hotel opened and a face peered cautiously in.

"Come in, Grip," said the clerk, and in response to the invitation Iron Grip stepped into the hall.

He looked demoralized and not like the swaggering bully of a few hours before, and Johnny was struck with the change.

"Johnny," he said, in a whisper.

"Waal, Iron?"

"Whar is it?"

"What?"

"Thet which tackled me."

"In bed."

"Sart'in he ain't wakef, is?"

"No, he's gone to sleep."

"I'm glad."

"Why, man, you look scared."

"I is scared, Johnny."

"At what?"

"That 'arthquake I run ag'in'."

"He's a bad one, Iron."

"Sure."

"He handled you mighty easy."

"Don't speak of it, Johnny."

"Waal, Iron, I'll tell yer I thought he was

jist ther man you wanted ter tackle, and so I tuk him up to yer table and give yer ther wink ter go fer him."

"And I went fer him, didn't I, Johnny?"

"You did?"

"And, Johnny, he come mighty near killin' my father's son."

"You bet."

"And when I left ther saloon, and started out on ther piazza, thar he were and he had me covered, and said git!"

"And—"

"I got, Johnny."

"You ran?"

"It seemed so ter me, Johnny."

"Did he fire at you?"

"No, but he laughed as if he were glad ter see me dust, and I dusted lively, fearin' I were goin' ter catch ther bone-yard fever."

"Waal, he cleaned out a feller here ter-night in ther same style."

"So I heard, Johnny, and thet is why I was cautious in coming, for I was afeerd ther boys would set him onter me."

"We closed up, yer knows, at twelve o'clock, and thar is no one here, so I sent ter see yer."

"Has yer got ther key o' ther bar, Johnny, fer I is awful dry?"

"Yes, I've got it, and we'll go in an' hev suthin'."

So into the bar they went, and after Johnny and his pal had "braced up" with a stiff drink, the formersaid:

"Do you mean to let thet feller take ther town, Jim?"

"He's got it."

"Well, does yer intend ter fight ter git it back?"

"Johnny, let me tell yer a few words o' Gospil."

"Yer knows me, an' yer hes seen me tried, when I waltzed to ther front in a style thet were charmin'; but thet man clean upset me, and he's got a grip I never thought were human possibility afore."

"He shoots as he grips, right whar he wants ter, as he did at ther pard ter-night, fer he tuk him clean atween ther eyes they tells me."

"He did; it was a beautiful shot."

"Waal, I is upstot, as I says, an' I'll hev ter leave Saw Dust, or ther boys will never let up."

"Say, Iron?"

"Waal, Johnny."

"Thet is why I sent fer yer."

"Ter leave town?"

"Yas."

"You has suthin' up."

"I'll tell yer, Iron, thet feller has got plenty o' dust, and he sleeps sound."

"I has a key to his room, and we'll go in thar quiet, and you use your knife on him, while I perfects yer, if he wakes up."

"You take ther dust and git, and that will be all thar is of it, fer I'll tell ther boys I seen ther man run out as did it, and it wasn't you."

"What does yer say?"

"Whar is I ter go?"

"Make fer ther Hermit's Canyon, and hide thar until I brings yer a horse an' all yer needs, an' kin tell yer whar ter go, fer thar's work you kin do."

"What does yer say, Iron Grip?"

"I'll do it."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ASSASSINS.

THERE was one peculiarity about the locks on the room doors at the Sinner's Rest which Room Key Johnny prided himself upon.

This was, that though the door might be locked within, and the key in the lock, he could open it.

Now Johnny confessed in his earlier days to being a locksmith, when the truth is he had proven such an adept at the trade, he had dropped it for the "profession" of lock-breaking.

It was this little scientific knowledge on the part of Room Key Johnny which had caused him to hasten from the scenes of his youth toward the land of the setting sun, where he expected he would have to pass his old age, for with a rope cravat awaiting his neck for a murder he had committed in house-breaking, he had no desire to return to the home of his childhood.

Now Room Key Johnny had put his scientific knowledge to use in the hotel, and the result was that he could do just what he told Iron Grip, open any door from without, and do it noiselessly, too.

When therefore, Iron Grip had decided upon carrying out the red work in hand, he was quite tremulous, and Johnny said:

"Take another drink, Grip."

This was done, and then came the words:

"Now, my knife is dull, Grip, so use yours, and mind yer, send ther blow home."

"I'll do it," said the man, and he drew his bowie and passed his finger over the edge, tenderly feeling the point also.

Now Johnny was revengeful, and he meant to have revenge on the scout, for having handled him so readily; but he was desirous that another should strike the blow.

"How's it to be done, Johnny?"

"Well, I'll turn his key in the lock with my little tools, and then shoot back ther bolt."

"Then we'll go in, and you creep up to ther bed and drive yer knife home, while I'll be right thar ter let him hev mine, ef he is able to show fight, for we mustn't use guns."

"No."

"If all is done without raisin' ther house, I'll see thet yer get off with all ther dust and sich; but if he's able ter kick up a row, and alarms ther house you git out o' ther winder, and I'll pretend I jest run in ter see what were up, so I'll half undress, tumble up my bed, fer yer knows I sleeps next to ther office?"

"Yas."

"Are yer ready?"

"Give me a leetle more juice ter steady my nerves."

"Don't git drunk, Grip."

"No danger, pard," and the drink was taken. Then the two men left the bar, and after the huge clerk had divested himself of some of his clothing, and rumpled up his bed, in the little box of a room adjoining the office, they stole toward the door of the scout's room.

Reaching it Johnny set to work with some tools he had, and it was not long before the skillful burglar had opened the door, and with but the slightest sound attending his work.

Entering, all was dark within, though the starlight through the windows enabled them to see the room distinctly enough for their purpose.

They crept toward the bed, Iron Grip leading, and with his right hand already raised and grasping the long, murderous knife.

Nearer and nearer they crept, scarcely daring to breathe, and then down upon the outlined form came the savage blade.

A curse escaped from the lips of Iron Grip, while against the head of each pressed a cold muzzle and a stern voice said:

"Hands up, gents!"

They had not seen the tall form glide into the door after them, follow them up, and then hold them at his mercy.

The words that broke from their lips do not look well in print, but in their surprise they did not neglect to obey the stern order:

"Hands up, gents!"

"Now march!"

They obeyed, out of the door into the lighted hallway and thence to the office.

"Now, gentlemen, you will excuse me if I disarm you, and to lower a hand means death."

Then, laying one of his revolvers upon the desk, with his disengaged hand Buffalo Bill disarmed first one and then the other of the pair.

"This rope is handy," he said with a smile, and he took a lariat down from a hook and skillfully bound the prisoners, back to back.

Then he led them to the room, wherein was the body of Fanshaw, and said:

"Sit down!"

They obeyed, and taking another lasso, which he had found in the office, he cut it in two and bound the feet of one, tying the end to the bed on which lay the dead man.

The other's feet were likewise secured, and the rope-end made fast to a hook on the wall.

"Now, gentlemen, if you can get up from here, you will be smarter than I think; but I forgot one thing," and the scout left the room.

In a short while he returned with two sticks, a piece of blanket and some string.

These he made into gags which he forced into the mouth of each man, and raising his sombrero with mock politeness, he said:

"I bid you adieu, pards."

Then he locked the door, for Johnny had mended the lock after its having been broken off by the scout, and placing the key in his pocket he went back to his room.

"I tellee rightee allee samee," said the Chinese servant, popping his head into the room as the scout was lighting his candle, and who was the same one whom Room Key Johnny had sent on the errand after Iron Grip.

"Yes, my good fellow, you did me a great service, and, had I been a hard sleeper, and not been warned, they would have killed me."

"They muchee mad, dontee?"

"Yes, they are not happy; but here, let me make you this present, and then I wish you to go to Fort — and give this piece of paper to the officer in charge there, and he will look after you until I get back, when I will see that you are taken care of," and Buffalo Bill gave the Chinese a buckskin bag of gold and a piece of paper upon which some words were written.

"Havee brother Chinees; goodee allee samee likee me," said the Chinese, with a grin.

"All right, take him with you to the fort, and you'll both find something to do there, for I tell you again, you did the square thing by me."

"Johnes muchee frightee, dontee?"

"Oh yes, they were both crushed at their failure, and did not utter a word."

"They think I was hiding in the room, as I would have been, had you not told me to get out of the window and watch them from the rear hall."

"But dawn is near, so you had better go to bed, Hop Up, so no one will suspect you."

"Good-by, and good luck, and don't forget to go with your brother in a few days to the fort, and go by the stage-coach, for here's money for your fares," and the scout thrust some more money into the hand of the Chinese, who grasped his hand warmly, and glided out of the room like a shadow.

Going to the bed Buffalo Bill removed the "dummy" of bedclothes, which Iron Grip had driven his knife into, and throwing himself down to rest he was almost instantly asleep.

The dawn lighting up his room awakened him, and rising he went out into the office.

All was still there, and he knocked at the door which he knew led into the room of Bunco.

A loud knock brought the landlord to the door, and he was fully dressed, though he had evidently been lying down.

"Ho, landlord, am I to get any breakfast before I start?" he asked.

"Johnny ordered it last night fer yer, pard."

"And the things I gave you a list of?"

"Is all packed in the saddle and in the stable."

"All right, and thank you; but do you wish to send the captain any word?"

"Waal, yer kin tell him I was all mixed up at havin' two men come here from him, instead o' ther reg'lar messenger, and I prefers he'll send in ther same old way."

"All right, I'll tell him; but strike the trail of that breakfast, if I'm to get any!"

"Johnny! oh, Johnny!" yelled Bunco.

But no response came, and the landlord sought his clerk in the office.

But he was not there.

"Here, landlord, you'd better bury that poor fellow at my expense," and the scout handed Bunco some money, which he grasped with the air of a man who felt that he was grasping that which he held dearer than all else on earth.

"I'll do it, fer this will bury him fu'st-class," he said, glancing at the amount.

But Johnny could not be found, though the cook had breakfast ready, and the scout ate it with a relish.

Bunco escorted him to the stable, and asked:

"Did ther cap'n say anything to you about Buf'ler Bill, ther army scout, bein' up in the mountains along with two others?"

"They know he was there."

"Well, Fanshaw had orders for me to send a party up there after Buffalo Bill and his pard; did you hear anything about it?"

"No, for Fanshaw left after I did, you remember."

"Yas, so he did."

"If the captain sent you word to send men, you had better do it, and let me know what to tell him."

"Waal, I'll send three good fellows, fer I dasn't trust more, and they'll get away with even Buffalo Bill an' his pard, fer I know who I'll pick."

"I'll tell him, landlord," and as his horses were ready, the white which Fanshaw had ridden bearing the pack-saddle, Buffalo Bill tossed the stableman his promised gold-piece, and mounted, while he said:

"By the way, Bunco, two persons in your house tried to kill me last night, and catching them at their little game, I tied them together, and you'll find them in the room keeping Fanshaw's body company."

"Good-by, Bunco," and the scout rode away, just as the sun peered over the mountain-tops, while Bunco, in amazement at his last words, rushed into the hotel and to the room where the prisoners were confined with their ghastly companion, while he said:

"One is Johnny, I'll bet dust on it, fer he hain't no man ter take ther knock-down he got and not seek revenge."

"Waal, that feller are ther boss o' ther cap'n himself," and Bunco threw himself against the door to open it, and went headlong into the room.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PHANTOM RIDERS.

ALTHOUGH the Hermit Parson and Toby kept pretty close to the crater-like camp of the former in the top of the mountains they were wont to go each day to the lookout over the valley.

It was the spot where Buffalo Bill had been standing when he met the old trapper.

The view, as the reader will remember, was vast and the whole valley for miles seemed at one's feet.

The river, the meadow lands, timber mottes here and there, hills, small streams, rocks, ridges, and beyond, the mountains.

The cliff went sheer down hundreds of feet, and a short distance back was a fringe of pine trees, in which the two companions were wont to sit and talk.

The old trapper's mind no longer wandered, as it had, and he told the negro of his sorrows in the past.

Toby was a most sympathetic listener, and he told, too, how he had been carried away, as a boy, by the love of the military, and run off and joined the army.

He had not heard from the good old people

on the old Southern plantation for a long, long time, but he hoped some day to go back with money and make them all feel his greatness.

"Thar's niggers thar, boss, I recommembers as sneerin' at me as no good, and I jist wants ter go back and let 'em see *Sergeant Nicodemus Toby*, for collud folks thinks more o' bein' a sergeant than most white folks does o' bein' ginerals."

"I did think when I had ter light out I'd never see home no more and git ther chance to put on airs; but Massa Buf'ler Bill will fix that all right, sah."

"Yas; I am sure he will, Toby."

"He's ther whitest man I knows, boss, meanin' no distarbanse ter yerself, sah, and he's as pop'lar at ther fort as a parson at a funeral, and as great a necessity, sah, fer they can't git 'long without Buf'ler Bill, sah."

"Why, them red-skins would jist walk right in an' scalp 'em ef it wa'n't fer him, boss."

"Yas; he has the name of being a wonderful man on the border, and from what I have seen of him I feel that he is not overrated, while I am sure he will recover my child for me, or, if she is dead, visit a revenge upon that villain that will make him wish he was never born."

"He will, sah, he will; and you mustn't fret, for all is comin' right, boss, ef Massa Bill handles it; but when does yer 'spect him back, sah?"

"He has been gone now ten days."

"Yas, boss, and I guess oughter be puttin' in a 'pearance mighty soon— Dar, sah, see how dat becomes yer."

And Toby handed the old trapper a blanket-coat which he had cut out and made for him.

The negro was a good tailor, and he had been pained to see the poor old trapper in rags that hardly held together, so he had taken a blanket and made him a pair of pants from it, following up his good work by a coat.

The trapper put it on with a look of real pride and said, as he grasped Toby's hand:

"You are a dear, good fellow, Toby, and some day I hope I can reward your kindness to me."

"Boss, I has my reward in seein' you cheered up and knowin' I has been able ter do you a favor—but look thar, sah!"

"Ef that hain't a ghost on horseback I never'll go ter heaven, and in ther daytime too," and Toby spoke eagerly, and pointed to a white object in the valley, a mile distant from where they were seated in the edge of the pine thicket.

The old trapper hastily glanced in the direction indicated, and said slowly:

"A white-robed form on a white horse."

"Yas, sah, dat means ghost!"

The object that attracted the attention of Toby had emerged from a clump of timber in the valley, and came to a halt in an open space.

It was a white horse, and the rider was clad in a snowy garment that covered his form.

Like a statue of marble looked horse and rider, as they remained motionless in the open space, and the eyes of the trapper and the negro were riveted upon them.

"It's a ghost, boss," said Toby, in a whisper.

"It is, I fear, another poor victim for the wolves," returned the trapper, sadly.

"No, sah, dat horse didn't have no hobbles on, de way I seen him move, no, sah."

"I have seen phantom horsemen before, but only on moonlight nights," the trapper remarked, thoughtfully.

"I wish it was 'arly mornin', 'stead o' nearly sunset," Toby rejoined, with a shudder, evidently dreading the coming on of night, with that spectral-looking horseman in view.

"There comes another," said the trapper.

"One was more dan I likes," and Toby's eyes fell upon another white horse and white-robed rider that rode out of the timber from whence the first one had come.

He rode near the other and halted, keeping the same motionless attitude.

"Lordy! thar comes another one, boss, yas, and de woods is full of 'em, fer dere is Number Four," and Toby shivered.

Soon a fifth appeared, all white steeds and riders with snowy garments.

The four halted near the first one for a few moments, remained motionless, and then they rode slowly away, crossing the meadow-land and disappearing in a dense growth of timber.

"Boss, what do that mean?" asked Toby.

"It is to scare us."

"Waal, they scares me, dat's a fact."

"It is the trick of the men who have some strange motive for remaining in these mountains."

"I b'l'ieves dey is ghosts, boss."

The trapper smiled at Toby's earnest way, and replied:

"Well, suppose we go on foot down into the valley and see if we can get a nearer look at them, for they will come around by the river crossing doubtless, as they have gone into yonder timber."

"Boss, I is jest a leetle too near 'em now, for I don't hanker arter ghosts."

"Yet you played ghost yourself, Toby," said the trapper, with a smile.

"I did that, sah, ter skeer dem as I was afeard of; but don't let us go down in de valley, sah."

"All right, Toby, you stay here, while I take a run down to the valley."

"Boss, you isn't goin' alone, sah, for I goes with yer," and so the two started down the steep mountain-side, for the trapper had a desire to get a closer look at the weird horsemen.

The sun had set, and, as they reached the valley darkness had settled there, though the mountain-tops were yet bathed in light.

Hardly had they reached the foot of the ridge, when the keen ear of the hermit caught some sound, and he drew Toby back into the deeper shadow of some trees that belted the base of the mountain.

"What is it, boss?" whispered Toby.

"Look!"

Toby did look, and he saw a white object coming along the deer-trail toward them.

It must pass within a few feet of where they were crouching, and Toby grew very nervous, and seemed inclined to bound away.

But the grip of the trapper held him as in an iron vise, and thus they waited.

It was stony ground over which the white horse and rider came, and yet the hoof-fall gave back no sound.

"It's ther phantoms! ther Lord hab marcy 'pon dis sinful nigger's soul, an' bress dem as persecutes me," almost groaned Toby, as he saw one, two, three, four and five shadowy horsemen coming along the trail.

They came slowly, and without a sound, and the riders were motionless as though dead.

Within fifteen feet they passed, and when the last one had gone by Toby gave a sigh of relief that seemed to have come from his inmost soul.

"If Buffalo Bill had been here, Toby, he would have commanded a halt to those phantom-like horsemen," said the trapper.

"I is really glad Massa Buf'ler isn't here," was the fervent response of the negro.

Then he added:

"Boss, ef it's ter tackle a grizzly, fight Injuns, or face men as fer men, yer'll find me right by yer side; but as fer ghosteses, I hain't no inclination ter see 'em."

"I know you are a brave man, Toby, and I confess these are most mysterious beings we have just seen; yes, and horses, too, for their hoofs gave back no sound; but when the scout comes back we will solve the mystery, see if we do not."

"Now come, and let us return to our camp, for we left our horses unguarded from wolves, not expecting to come this far," and the two started upon their climb up the hill back to the camp.

They heard the howl of wolves, as they approached, and hastened their steps, for they well knew how savage were the wild beasts through those mountains, and their horses had been staked out in the crater, or bowl, on the top of the ridge, where the grass grew most luxuriantly.

They found the two animals very nervous, and were greeted with a neigh of pleasure as they approached, while the howling wolves, who had been preparing for a feast, snarled savagely at being thwarted.

Leading the animals into their stable, in the large cavern, the trapper tied them there, while Toby threw fresh wood upon the fire at the entrance and set about preparing supper, for there was no danger of the light being seen in that place, or of any one finding the secret camp.

As they ate their supper they talked over the sight they had seen of the Phantom Horsemen, and when they lay down upon their blankets to rest, Toby's dreams were disturbed during the night by the weird steeds and riders being constantly before him, conjured up by the very hearty supper he had eaten, for his appetite had held good in spite of the ghosts.

CHAPTER XXX.

COWED.

WHEN Bunco burst open the door, with such force as to go sprawling into the room, he was not alone, as he afterward wished he had been.

There were always a few very early risers in Saw Dust City, men who had been drinking deep the night before, and who sought to quench the thirst in their parched throats the next morning.

Not with water, however, for that was not an alleviator of thirst after strong drink, and they turned from the crystal stream that ran near their cabins with a shudder and hurried to the piazza to be the first one in when the bar should open.

There was one assistant of Rum Charlie whose duty it was to be on hand for the sunrise opening of the bar that the toppers might get their morning "bracer," and he was just coming along the hallway a trifle late, when he saw the landlord rush to the door of the room in which the body of Fanshaw had been placed.

Realizing by their feelings that the bar-man was late, the crowd outside, numbering some dozen, had entered the hotel to discover the cause, when in from the side entrance they saw Bunco dash with a speed they had never before seen him exhibit.

Unheeding their presence, the landlord had thrown himself against the door and gone in.

But they were close upon him, as they knew that something of importance had happened to excite Bunco in that way.

The tardy bar-man also entered and, though the toppers discovered him, their curiosity just then got the better of their thirst.

Some, knowing that the dead man had been placed in that room, supposed that he had risen to life again and hailed Bunco out of a back window to come and let him out.

This was the only solution of the mystery in the minds of the toppers.

When, therefore, the door was opened, they beheld the body just where it had been placed upon the bed.

There was no life there, as a glance would show.

But a glance was all they bestowed upon it, too, for their eyes were just then riveted upon a sight that almost paralyzed them.

At first they gave vent to murmurs of surprise, then to talk, and then to shouts of laughter, for the picture was a comical one to all but those who formed it.

Bunco had gotten upon his feet, and his face wore a strange look.

It was a puzzled expression, a pleased one, and a sad one all combined.

He saw there his clerk, Room Key Johnny, of grand stature, of brawny arm and a terror to mankind in Saw Dust City, the bouncer of the Sinner's Rest, tied hand and foot and gagged.

He saw Iron Grip, also a dreaded giant, in the same sad plight as was Johnny.

They sat upon the floor back to back, a lariat bound tightly around their waists and their hands tied firmly together.

Their feet were also bound, the rope from one being made fast to the bed upon which lay the ghastly form, that from the other being fastened to a hook in the wall.

They could not move to get up, and if they had tried to they would have tipped over on their sides and thus remained.

Their faces were black with passion and working with hatred, while in the mouth of each was a stick, wrapped around with a piece of blanket and fastened with strings at the back of the head.

So securely fastened were they that they could not force them from their mouths.

In dismay almost Bunco regarded them, and then he sprung forward, and with his knife severed the strings that held the gags.

The men breathed more freely, but they could not at first speak.

Then the ropes binding them together, their feet and their arms, were also cut, and the two men were free.

But they were stiff and wretched, and made no effort to speak.

They felt the humiliation of their position, and looked as savage as wolves.

But the crowd, now increased to over a score, enjoyed it.

Nearly all present had suffered at the hands of those two huge bullies, and it was delightful to see that some one had caused them to suffer.

"What are it, pards?" asked one.

"Durned ef I didn't think you was ther Si-amese Twins," said another.

"Did ther stiff rise up and tie yer?"

"Yas, they was sittin' up with ther stiff, and his ghost jist tied 'em."

"Yer ougter hev hed yer pictur's tuk, ter show ther boys."

Such were the remarks that were heard from those present, and after each one the crowd laughed.

"What's it all about, Johnny?" asked Bunco.

But Johnny made no reply; his mouth pained him and was as dry as dust.

"Waal, I kin tell yer, pards, as they don't talk; it's ther pilgrim as was here last night as did it, fer he told me as he rid off that two ger-loots in ther tavern tried to kill him, and he held a full hand and trumped thar leetle game, and I'd find 'em here, tied up."

"Ther dandy who kicked Iron Grip and slewed that feller over thar waitin' ter be planted?" asked one.

"Yas, that's ther man," and at Bunco's reply the two unfortunates groaned.

"Whar is be?" called out several.

"He hev gone home, wharever that is," cried Bunco.

"We didn't try ter kill him, and he used us foul," growled Johnny, at last finding his voice, though it was very husky.

"Yas, he come a treacherous game on us, he did, when we war tryin' ter do him a favor," said Iron Face.

The crowd shouted, while Bunco said:

"I sh'ud hev thought two sich terrors as you is ougter hev got away with him."

"We was takin' a quiet leetle drink with him, and we didn't hev no weepens on, and he jist covered us with his knock-me-downs, and then Grip, fer yer sees whar he hit us, and then while we was unconscious he tied us up this way."

Again the men yelled at Room Key Johnny's explanation, and it was very evident they did not believe a word of it.

This infuriated Iron Grip, and he yelled out:

"Does yer say Johnny and me lies?"

"Yes! yes!" came in a perfect howling chorus.

"Yer does, and more, yer spurs has been clipped, and you hain't no more good ter play terrors in this town."

"Thet's so!"

"No good!"

"Cowed!"

"Yer've hed ter knuckle."

"Ther stranger salted yer both."

And the crowd became ugly, for the two bullies had had their day, and an effort to regain prestige meant they would have to fight for it then and there.

"Come, pards, these men have had hard treatment, and you is too many ag'in' 'em, while yer see ther stranger pulled ther teeth, too, fer they hain't got ther guns."

"So let up on 'em, now, and when they gits ther sand ag'in, maybe some o' ye will hev ter take a back seat, or be ther subject fer a bury-in'," and Bunco faced the crowd.

But the miners laughed, and he saw that the laugh was an ugly one, so he said, quickly:

"Come, pards, it's my treat, and we'll go and take su'thin' all round."

He led the way as he spoke from the room, and the crowd followed him with alacrity, for Bunco had struck the right chord when he gave an invitation to drink, something he never did except when forced to it.

The toppers had almost forgotten their morning "eye-opener" in the interest of finding the two bullies in durance vile; but the magic words of "takesu'thin'," brought back the pangs of thirst once more, and in a moment they were ranged two deep before the bar.

But neither Johnny nor Iron Grip went with them.

They waited until the crowd departed, and then Johnny led the way to the room just vacated by Buffalo Bill.

A Chinese servant was hailed by the clerk, and sent after a bottle of whisky and two glasses, and seating themselves at the table they took two stiff drinks before they uttered a word.

Then Johnny said, dolefully:

"Pard, is you deeply attached ter this town o' Saw Dust City?"

"Waal, I ain't jist now," was the lugubrious response.

"Don't yer think we is done fer here?"

"Our usefulness is about played out in this community, Johnny."

"So I considers, Grip."

"Yer don't think we c'u'd catch on again?"

"Ter ther graveyard, sure."

"Yer mean they would call in our checks?"

"Sart'in."

"Ef we sailed in on 'em with a gun in each hand, or lassoed ther toes of several of 'em up towards ther sky?"

"No use, fer they'd play ther same game."

"We might try it," said Iron Grip, his courage rising with another drink of whisky,

"Don't be a fool, Grip."

"Waal, I won't."

"We might git our grip ag'in in one way."

"How's thet?"

"Ter bring back thet dandy fer burial purposes right here."

"Waal, now, thet is a good idee."

"It could be did."

"As how?"

"I think I knows about ther trail he hes tuk, though Bunco don't tell me all he knows."

"Yas."

"You has a horse?"

"I has a good one."

"And I has one thet are hard ter beat."

"Waal, Johnny, you is fishin' fer somethin'."

"I means as we can't stay here we gits our traps tergether and light out."

"It is about all we kin do, ef we don't git inter a scrimmage afore we starts."

"No, we'll stay right here, and I'll git a Chinese ter go arter your horse and traps, up at yer cabin, as soon as it gits dark."

"My home is in ther stable here, and ther Chinese kin buy us jist what we wants in ther way o' provisions."

"Then we kin light out as soon as it is dark, and in ther morning we kin strike thet dandy's trail and foller him."

"He has a long start."

"Yas, but his horses carries heavy loads, and he won't ride far in a day, or push 'em, and we kin creep up onter him at his next night's camp."

"I sees what yer means, pard Johnny."

"Ter kill him," was the savage response.

"I'm agreeable."

"Waal, we kin do it, for both you and me is good trailers, and we kin slip up onter his camp at night and fix him with our rifles, for he's human."

"You bet, ef he don't seem it."

"He's got a good lot o' things with him, plenty o' gold-dust, two horses and his weapons, and we won't git a bad haul, while, ef we kills him, we kin come here ter Saw Dust and boss ther camps."

"I'm with yer, pard," was the earnest reply, and, after hiding in their room all day, the two assassins started after nightfall on the trail of Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A PICKED TRIO.

THE action of Room Key Johnny and Iron Grip, in hiding all day, was strongly commented upon by the denizens of Saw Dust City, and that which was said was by no means to their credit.

They had been so thoroughly unpopular, that all were glad of their downfall.

They had been so overbearing, that few had dared do otherwise than fawn upon them.

They possessed brute strength in a remarkable degree, were noted as dead shots, could handle a knife in a skillful manner, and were supposed to know no such word as fear.

But their downfall was complete, and they tumbled together from the pinnacle upon which they had so long stood.

The stranger, whom no one seemed to know, had proven himself the master of them both.

He had knocked Johnny into a corner upon his first arrival, for it had leaked out about this encounter, and he had sent Iron Grip flying in the saloon.

When he had defeated Fanshaw in a stand-up battle, and, when he attempted to kill him, by treacherously drawing a weapon hidden in his boot, the stranger had sent him to join the great majority in the twinkling of an eye.

When the crowd left the saloon of the Sinner's Rest, they knew that the same roof sheltered the unknown man and the one he had slain; but it was not expected that he was to give them an entertainment before sun-up, as he did, in binding as he had the two desperadoes.

The story told by Johnny of the affair no one believed, not even Bunco, for all set it down pretty near the truth that robbery and revenge had prompted the two villains to attempt a deadly game upon the stranger, and he had beaten them at it.

Why he had left so early they did not know; but they did not attribute it to fear on his part.

So the story was the talk of the day, and the saloons were crowded by the interested gossipers, while the health of "the unknown pard" was drunk over and over again, until, had Buffalo Bill returned to Saw Dust City, he could have proclaimed himself "king of the mines" and been acknowledged as such.

Bunco had sought the two men in their hiding-place, and told them frankly that they would have a hundred fights on their hands if they came out.

He advised them to stay where they were, and, through some sympathetic tie that bound him to his clerk, or some secret that the clerk held of his, he sent for Iron Grip's horse and things, got all ready for their departure, and saw them mount and ride away from the rear of the stable.

It may be that Bunco was glad to see Johnny depart, for he had a certain awe of him from some cause, and as the clerk had hinted what their intention was, he did not know of a better way to become wholly rid of him than to let him attempt to carry out his plot of killing Buffalo Bill.

He gave a deep sigh of relief as he saw them ride off, and then entering the bar-room, extended an invitation to all present to attend the funeral of his lamented friend Fanshaw the following morning from Sinner's Rest, when the body would be borne to Sinner's Hope, as the cemetery was called.

Having been applauded for his intention to entertain them, for a funeral was a day of holiday in Saw Dust City, the wary landlord got still a firmer grip upon his patrons by telling Rum Charlie to extend a drink all around at his expense.

While in the saloon the keen eyes of Bunco had taken in all who were there, and he had given three separate signs to three separate persons.

These signs were understood, for first one who had received it got up and left the room, then a second, and next the third.

Though the two first had gone out by the front door, they quickly entered the hotel, where the third was already, having entered from the saloon.

Bunco stood in his room door and beckoned to them, and as the last entered it was tightly closed behind him.

The quarters of the landlord were really comfortable, in fact luxurious for that wild land; but he loved his ease, and he had carted over prairie and mountain the furniture that was there, besides adding many little things that one would not expect to find on the border.

"Be seated, gentlemen," he said, in his most insinuating way, but it was to save his politeness, for they had taken seats as soon as they entered, for they were not a trio to stand on ceremony even with the landlord of the Sinner's Rest.

The three were alike in one respect—that is, they were villainous in countenance.

In other respects they differed, for one was very tall and slim, but wiry as an Indian, another of medium hight, thick-set and muscular, and the third a small man with an air of pom-

posity equal to a bantam rooster, as though to make up in dignity what he lacked in size.

They were all dressed as miners, and there was scarcely any difference in their clothing, from the slouch hat to the top-boots and belt-of-arms.

Their faces differed in that one was a thorough brunette, another a perfect blonde and the third red-headed and red-bearded.

They had been about the three first men in Saw Dust City, had struck a dozen good leads, and gambling them away, had come down to almost hard-pan, as far as money was concerned.

Working together and living together in one cabin as they did, they had gained the appellation of The Triplets, while individually they were known as Long, Short and Stumpy from their various sizes.

"Gentlemen, I gave you a look which I am glad you took in, fer I wants ter hev a talk with yer," said Bunco in as insinuating a manner as he could assume, and he took from a cupboard a bottle of his "private stock," and placed it upon the table with four glasses.

The Triplets smiled, for they loved liquor, as the expressive coloring of their noses indicated.

"We is your comrades, Landlord Bunco," said Long.

"We is so," Short said, and Stumpy chimed in last with:

"You can count on us, Mr. Bunco."

"I know it, for you hev been in these mines some five year now and thar ain't one o' yer been kilt."

"Not a one," said Long.

"We still live," echoed Short.

"We are all here," Stumpy added.

"I knows fellers as has tried ter lay yer out, and they is sleepin' peaceful up in ther Sinner's Hope."

"We has our record writ up thar, Mister Bunco, and we'll take pleasure in showin' it to yer," said Long.

"It are in eleven chapters," Short rejoined.

"Yas, I has a chapter yet ter right ter make up ther twelve graves, fer my pards here has one ther call on me; but I'll git thar all ther same," Stumpy said.

"Yer see, Mr. Bunco, we likes ter keep our stiffs tergether, and we fenced in a leetle lot and planted some wild-flowers thar, ter make it look kinder homelike for them as we sent thar."

"Yas, and we goes thar every Sunday," Short added.

"Yas, it's our solemn announcement ter git thar once a week."

Bunco knew his men, and he was well aware that they had a *bona fide* record of eleven graves in the Sinner's Hope Cemetery.

He knew they were dead shots, wild riders, a wicked trio, could follow any trail an Indian could, and knew neither mercy nor give up.

They could go through the mountains the darkest night, and if brought to bay could hold their own against treble their number, and in fact had done so more than once in Saw Dust City.

They were hard drinkers, hard fighters, reckless gamblers and as desperate as men could be, while their luck was proverbial.

"Well, pards, I have a leetle work fer yer to do," said Bunco.

"Name it, pard."

"We is here."

"Call us."

"It will take you away from Saw Dust City for awhile."

"All serene, Mister Bunco."

"We won't git homesick."

"Thar is them here as will be glad we is gone."

"It is to go up into the Rockies, which folks speaks of as ther Haunted Mountains."

The men did not change color, but made their usual triple responses, Long beginning first and Stumpy ending.

"We is goin' on a ghost hunt then, Mister Bunco?"

"Thet's ther place ter find 'em."

"Yas; they say them mount'ins is ghost heaven."

"It's somethin' more lively than a ghost that you has ter tackle, pards."

"Waal, what are it?"

"Injuns?"

"Grizzly?"

"No. Thet which I wants yer ter go arter is three men."

"Thet all?"

"Only three?"

"One apiece."

"As far as pluck is concerned, and being able to handle themselves, I guesses they is about three of a kind; but I thought a show you Triplets could git away with 'em."

"I guess so, pards, eh?"

And Long glanced at his two companions.

"I've a idee we kin."

"We kin try."

"Now, as to tarms."

"Yas; thet are of interest ter us."

"Gold-dust talks."

"We is poor, Mister Bunco."

"Well, I will give you each a hundred dol-

lars ter start with, fit yer out from ther store with what ammunition, provisions and all else yer may need, giving yer a pack-horse ter carry 'em, and when yer comes back with proof yer hev got away with them three men I will give yer another hundred apiece, while yer'll get their horses and traps ter sell."

"I'm thar."

"It's money easy made."

"Yas; it's a leetle trip fer ther good o' our health."

"Then you accepts?"

"We does."

And Long spoke for the others, who nodded in the affirmative.

"Now, pards, hes yer ever heerd o' Buffalo Bill?"

"Well, now, who haint?"

"I hes heerd o' him."

"Hes we ever heerd o' Saw Dust City?"

The look that passed between the three men showed the shrewd Bunco, who saw it, that they knew more of Buffalo Bill than they cared to admit.

"Waal, he's ther man thet leads ther band o' three in ther Haunted Mountains."

"No."

"Is that so?"

"Does yer mean it?"

"I do; he, an old man known here two years ago as the Trapper Parson and a big nigger soldier are ther triplets yer has ter tackle."

"Ther parson are all right, ther nigger sojer haint skeery to us, but Buffalo Bill—"

"Now yer is shriekin', pard, for Buffalo Bill—"

"Yas; Buffalo Bill—is ther devil hisself!"

And the last remark of Stumpy seemed to fit the situation exactly, for the other two nodded approvingly.

"You fears him then?"

"Mr. Bunco, he is no man to fool with."

"He are chain-lightnin' let loose on a racket."

"When he gits inter a fight he hes a contract ter pervide stiffs fer ther bone-yard."

"Well, you refuses the job, now yer knows who yer is to tackle?"

"No; we didn't say that."

"We hasn't backed down yet."

"We is considerin', pard."

"Why, yer kin clip him, fer yer goes in secret like, and I gives yer points jist now ter scotch him."

"He's worth more money, Mister Bunco."

"A clean hundred apiece more."

"Thet would about be his value."

"Well, I'll give you another hundred apiece when your work is done."

"He's ter be kilt?"

"Yes; and the others, too, while I am to have ther proof."

"Yer shall have it."

"We does our work up prime."

"We'll git thar, pard."

"Well, now ter business, and after I have shown yer jist whar ter go and what ter do, you kin start soon as yer likes."

This ended the death compact between Bunco and The Triplets against the life of Buffalo Bill and his two comrades, and the next day, after Fanshaw's funeral, which was a gala affair, the three men, armed to the teeth, with a pack-horse supplied with all they would need, set off on their trail to the Haunted Mountains.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TWO TRAILERS.

THE two worthies, or rather unworthies, whom revenge had started upon the trail of Buffalo Bill rode along at a brisk pace for several hours, until they came to a trail leading off from the Overland stage track.

Here they halted and each took from the pack-saddle on the led horse a lantern, lighted it and began to examine the tracks all about in the road.

"Here's ther way he went, as I supposed he would, fer yer see them tracks?" said Johnny, pointing to the hoof-marks in the trail branching off into the mountains.

"Yas; but there is the hoof-marks o' three horses."

"He had two, I know, one belonging to thet gerlout he kilt, and his own."

"This is his horse's hoof-mark, fer I got it down fine when he was at ther stable, as I hed an idee I would want ter foller him ef I c'u'dn't git even with him in Saw Dust."

"Waal, it looks as though he had comp'ny."

"I guesses not, only somebody else, some hunter maybe, has gone this way."

So the two mounted and pressed on for a couple of hours more, when they caught sight of a flickering light off through the timber.

Instantly they dismounted and walked toward it.

"It's a deserted camp, and ther fire hes sprung up ag'in," said Iron Grip, as they saw a fire, a log burning brightly, up a narrow canyon.

"It are his camp, whar he stayed ther fu'st night out, so yer sees we has gained on him fast."

"Yas, and we'll come up with him ter-morrer night, and we'll hev ter, as another day will put him inter ther Haunted Hills."

"Thet's so."

Then they saw that there was no mistake about the camp being that of the man whose trail they followed, for the hoof-prints told the story.

There were but the tracks of two horses, and this seemed a relief to them, and convinced them that the third prints they had seen had been left by some hunter or prospector.

So they pushed on rapidly until sunrise, and found the trail distinct and not very stale, proving that their intended victim could not be very far ahead.

"He don't push ahead fast," said Iron Grip.

"No, he takes it slow."

"I wonder he didn't take t'other valley road, and save so much hill work, while it's shorter."

"Waal, ther trail are often traveled, and I guesses he wanted ter keep out o' folks' way, for I heerd him tell Bunco he would come this way."

"I see," and after a ride of a mile further they drew off from the trail and went into camp.

The horses were glad of a rest, and ate heartily of the grass that grew about them in profusion, while the two men built a fire and got breakfast, after which they went to sleep.

But after several hours they awoke and pressed on once more, keeping up a steady and rapid gait.

"We'll fetch him to-night, Grip," said Johnny.

"Easy, fer them marks haint three hours old," was the reply.

"We kin rest ther critturs arter we has for'ad him, for ef we don't find whar he leaves ther trail afore night comes on, we may pass him in ther darkness."

"Thet are a fact, so we'll ride for all ther critturs is worth."

And so they rode on until, just before night-fall, they looked over the ridge of a hill and beheld their game.

It was the scout, and he was riding leisurely along, the pack-horse close behind him.

Dismounting the two assassins watched him as he descended the hillside into the valley, and saw him, in the gathering gloom, turn to the right.

"Thar he camps, Grip."

"Yas, he's gone off ther road ter find a good place."

"You come on with ther hosses, while I look ahead on foot."

"When yer gits ter whar he left ther trail, jist wait fer me," and Iron Grip set off down the hillside at a swinging pace.

The scout had been fully half a mile away, when he had left the trail, and it was a distance quickly covered by the tracker.

It was too dark for him to see the trail, but he knew which way the scout had gone, and he followed with the instinct natural to one on the border.

A walk of several hundred yards, and he halted.

A glimmer on the tree-tops told him there was a fire ahead.

Cautiously he crept on, and soon, in one of the numerous canyons penetrating the mountain-side, he discovered the game he sought.

The scout was there, he had built a fire in a crevice of the rocks, his horses were near, not yet unsaddled, but feeding upon the grass growing on the sides of the canyon.

So Iron Grip hastily retreated and arrived at the trail to find Johnny there with the horses.

"Waal, Grip?"

"He's thar."

"In camp?"

"Snug as a bug in a rug."

"How far?"

"About a quarter o' a mile."

"So we has him?"

"Yas."

"Kin we git up close?"

"We kin, as thar is underbrush growin' up quite close."

"Then he's our game."

"It looks so ter me."

"Waal, what now?"

"Find a camp for our horses, pard," and the two strode away in an opposite direction.

They soon found a good camping-place, staked their horses out, built a fire and had supper.

Then they looked carefully to their arms, divested themselves of all they did not need to carry with them, and set off in fighting trim.

"He'll lose no time in setting up, arter he hes hed his supper, pard, so we'll find him sleepin'," said Iron Grip.

"I does pray thet we will, fer I wants him ter wake up dead," Johnny returned, with no idea of just how good an Irish bull he had been guilty of.

But Iron Grip understood well what he meant, as was evident from his response:

"Yas, he's got ter be kilt in his sleep, fer he are too dangerous ter let wake up."

At last they arrived in sight of the glimmering firelight, as it shone up out of the canyon on the tree-tops above.

They studied the situation of the camp carefully.

The canyon ran back some hundred feet into the mountain, was about thirty feet wide, and the banks were fringed with trees, while the sides were fringed with grass.

Beyond the camp-fire, up the canyon, the two horses had been placed, and lariats had been stretched across just at the camp, to prevent their getting out, so that they could be turned loose and fed at will.

The fire was built in a small crevice of the rocks, and to one side were the saddles, pack-saddle and bridles, and upon the other, wrapped in his blankets, the form of the scout.

"Ef he jist hed a idee we was arter him, Grip, I'd feel narvous about thet bein' him," said Johnny.

"Thet's him, fer thar's his boots toward ther fire, and he hes his hat over his head."

"Now, we has him this time."

"And shall we open on him with our revolvers?"

"It's time ter take them when ther rifles fail; but you fire at his head right under his hat, and I'll jist send my bullet s'archin' for his heart."

"I are ready," was the answer.

The two men were not sixty feet away, and raising their rifles together, they counted in chorus:

"One, two, three, fire!"

The reports rung out in the canyon like a hundred guns, and the form was seen to twitch violently and then remain still.

"We has him!" yelled Johnny.

"And his gold-dust," shouted Iron Grip.

Then, revolver in hand, they rushed forward, while the two startled horses snorted wildly, as they trotted to the lariat barrier across the canyon.

But only half a dozen yards had the two assassins advanced when a tall form bounded down from a rocky shelf, ten feet above the fire, and instantly followed the crack of a revolver.

Iron Grip dropped in his tracks, his revolver going off as he fell, while Johnny, with a yell of terror, fell upon his knees and raising his hands above his head, shouted:

"My hands is up, pard! don't shoot!"

"I would serve you right to kill you, but I am no murderer, to fire on a man who begs for mercy," said Buffalo Bill, sternly, and stepping forward he disarmed the wretch, who trembled violently.

Then he bound him securely, his hands behind his back, and said:

"Where is your camp?"

"I'll show you, sir, indeed I will."

"Is that your only companion?" and he pointed to the dead body.

"Yes, pard, he are all."

"Wait until I pull my boots on and I'll go with you," and the scout walked to the fire and picked up his hat from the blankets, which were wrapped about a log.

Then he put on his boots, while Johnny, hoping to curry favor, said:

"Maybe Grip hain't dead, pard, and he might rise up and kill yer."

"No danger of that, sir," was the cool reply, and, with perfect confidence in his aim he said:

"Now to your camp."

The man led the way, and in half an hour they returned, leading the horses, and bringing their traps.

"Now, if your dead friend has any valuables with him, you can have them."

"Thank you, pard," and the body was quickly stripped of all that was valuable about it.

"Now take this hatchet and dig a grave, for you should do that much for your comrade."

The wretch obeyed, a grave was dug, Iron Grip placed in it, and it was filled in and covered with heavy logs, to keep off wild beasts.

Then Buffalo Bill bound his prisoner again, threw his blankets down for him to sleep on, and retiring to his rude couch was soon fast asleep.

He awoke at dawn, got breakfast, gave Johnny some, and then said, as he was ready to start:

"Now, Johnny, I'm going to set you adrift, and you may be thankful that you are not under yonder logs."

"I'll give you your rifle and belt of arms, you have your own and your pard's money, and you shall have some provisions for a few days; but you go on foot," and soon after the scout was on his way, carrying with him the horses and outfit of his intended assassins, and leaving Johnny alone and on foot in the mountains, but happy in having been treated with that much mercy, when he knew that he deserved death.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WARNING.

WHEN Bunco had arranged his compact with The Triplets, he passed with them into the store, by the private passageway leading from his own rooms, and found Red Tom in the "Bonanza Palace" alone.

"Tom, I has a order for you, and it is ter fix these gents up for a cruise of some weeks," he said to Red Tom.

"All right, Bunco, it shall be did."

"When does yer expect ter start, pards?"

"To-morrer arter ther buryin'," said Long.

"Yas, we must attend ther funeral, out o' respect to ther remains."

"We never misses bein' in at buryin's," Stumpy chimed in last.

"Waal, jist say what yer wants, and I'll hev it all ready fer yer ter-night."

The order was given and The Triplets left.

"Whar's Johnny gone?" asked Red Tom.

"I don't know, but I guess ter seek another camp."

"Yas, he can't live here."

"Not after ther way thet stranger handled him, and Iron Grip."

"They went tergether?"

"Yes."

"Somebody's bound ter suffer."

"So they will, fer though their spurs is clipped here, they'll put on airs where they are not known; but where is Deer-Eyes?"

"He's just gone out afore you came in, and said he was goin' ter visit Miner Mingo's fam'ly up ther valley; but I'll stop him, fer I wants his help in gittin' out these things."

Bunco left, and Red Tom called his clerk, who entered, all ready for a ride.

"Dickie, I wants yer help, so yer can't go," said Red Tom.

"But I will go, for Mrs. Mingo is sick, her husband told me so to-day, and I have some things to take her," said the youth, firmly.

"I wants yer here, Dickie."

"I cannot help it, I am going, and as it is getting late, and some miles to the Mingo ranch, I'll start now."

"Don't you go," said the man, threateningly.

"I will," and wheeling on his heel the boy left the store.

His horse was all ready saddled for him, in the stable, and a splendid animal he was.

Slinging a pair of saddle-bags over the saddle the boy tightened his belt, which contained his weapons, and shot out of the stable, just as a Chinese servant came to tell him Red Tom sent for him to come back.

At a sweeping gallop the boy sped along the valley, and his horse kept up the pace untiringly, for mile after mile.

Then he halted at a stream, threw off the saddle, to cool the animal's back, rubbed him down hard, and, after half an hour of rest, gave him some water, and mounting again set off at the same sweeping pace.

For two hours he kept it up, and then he halted once more for rest, and again devoted himself to the care of his horse, saying in a kindly tone:

"This is a hard run, Flyer, but we must make it."

It had been very late when the youth had left, almost midnight, and he had gone at a slapping pace over the level land.

Dawn broke, as he mounted again, and after a few miles' ride in the same dashing style, he came to a hill which the valley trail led up.

As he mounted it, over the rocky ground he saw going along the ridge a horseman, a led horse following.

He had already been seen by the horseman, who came to a halt as the youth waved his hat to him.

A few moments more and the youth drew up his panting horse near and said:

"I have ridden hard to overtake you, Buffalo Bill."

"Ah! and you have been successful; but are you a pony rider?" said the scout, gazing upon the handsome, flushed face of the youth.

"No, sir: I am a clerk in Red Tom's store, which is Bunco's Bonanza Palace, as you will remember, for you were in there night before last."

"Yes; and I caught a glimpse of you there, and thought that you looked out of your element; but what can I do for you, lad?"

"The shoe is on the other foot this time, sir, for I can serve you now, though once you served me."

"Your face looks familiar, but I am at a loss to recall where I have seen you before night before last."

"It does not matter; but you did me and mine a service once, and I knew you when you entered the store; but no one else in town seemed to know you and so I said nothing."

"I am glad that you did, as it turned out, though I did not expect to hide my name when I went there; but what is it, young partner?"

"The two men whom you left tied hid in their room all day, and Hop Up, the Chinese, heard them swear to follow you and kill you."

"He told me, and I came on to warn you, for they left last night, following your trail by the mountain road, and I started some hours after by the valley way, feeling that I could catch you."

"And you have, though you have ridden hard."

"I did not expect to be tracked, so I owe you my life, my young friend."

"I have but returned a service done by you in the past; but this is not all, sir, for Bunco received word from some mysterious friend of his who dwells up in the Haunted Mountains that

you and two others were there, trying to solve the secret that kept them there."

"It was to tell Bunco this that Fanshaw, one of the mysterious band, was sent, and you killed him."

"You are playing a part, for I feel you do not belong to the band; but you deceived Bunco, and he does not know you as you are."

"So he obeyed the order sent him to send men from Saw Dust City to kill you and your two comrades, and last night Bunco put on the trail three of the most dangerous men in all this border."

"They are known as The Triplets, Long, Short and Stumpy, and they are splendid trailers, most desperate, and dead shots, while they go prepared to hunt you down."

"I have heard of those three gentlemen, and shall be glad to welcome them, now that you put me on my guard."

"But now to yourself; why do you remain in that camp?"

"I cannot help it, sir."

"If you will go with me I will see that you are taken care of."

"No, no, sir, I cannot go, I must stay there."

"But, remember, I have warned you, and the two first cannot now be far away, the others will look for you in the Haunted Mountains."

"Good-by, Buffalo Bill, and God bless you!"

The boy wheeled his horse as he spoke and rode away at a gallop, while Buffalo Bill in vain called to him to halt.

"I have half a mind to ride after him, and—No, he was in earnest in refusing to go with me, and some day I'll go back to Saw Dust City and look him up."

"Now to destroy his trail, so those fellows will suspect nothing—ah! he has left none, on these rocks, that will attract their attention, so I will go on my way, for to-night, when I camp, will be their time to attack me, as they cannot get ahead as this trail runs, to ambush me."

And so the scout rode on his way, his thoughts full of the strange, handsome boy who had given him so timely a warning of death on his track.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TRIPLETS FIND AN ALLY.

THE three men whom Bunco had selected for the putting out of the way of Buffalo Bill and his two comrades, in what were becoming known as the Haunted Mountains, were professional rascals.

They were good at all kinds of deviltry, and really had courage to back up their lawless acts.

In their union was their strength, for where many would have attacked one of them, or even two, a crowd, reckless though it might be, thought twice before picking a quarrel with the trio.

With a knack at following a trail, they felt no doubt but that they would accomplish the duty they were sent upon.

They knew that Buffalo Bill was not a man to subdue readily, and they were prepared to overcome him by cunning, for if it came to a hand-to-hand encounter though they might kill the scout, they were convinced, individually and collectively, that some one of the three would have to go.

Now not one of that trio cared to be sacrificed, and so they decided upon strategy.

And they made their arrangements for a siege, carrying ample provisions, and the best, for they were high livers, a quantity of ammunition, and everything in fact that they thought they would find useful.

As Bunco supplied the outfit, and they had but to order, they did it generously.

Then they departed for their cabin, where they gloried in a Chinese servant, who was called up and dispatched after help to aid him to bring the things they had gotten, for they cared not to attract attention by having them come by daylight.

The next morning they ordered Lick Skillet, the Chinese, to prepare their horses, carrying along with them a pack-animal and an extra, in case of the loss of one of their own steeds.

While Lick Skillet was getting the horses in readiness and burnishing up the saddles and trappings, the Triplets went on their way to the funeral of Fanshaw.

The miners had turned out in force, as was their wont, for the burial of a man who had "died with his boots on," so to speak, while when one was taken off by disease it was the custom to have a "time" over the occasion.

As ninety per cent. of the deaths in Saw Dust City were from violence, the miners were often having a day off for a funeral.

Of course Sinner's Rest was the center of attraction, for there lay the deceased.

Thither The Triplets went, and they found about two-thirds of the town there, while Rum Charlie was dispensing liquors at a lightning pace.

The Triplets arrived too late to be selected for the honor of pall-bearers, so contented themselves with taking the position of chief mourners along with Bunco, walking directly behind the coffin, which had been painted a rich car-

mine, doubtless on account of the man having been shot in a personal encounter.

On the top of the coffin the artist who had painted it had lettered his own idea of what was appropriate and which was as follows:

"FRANK FANSHAW

LIES WITHIN.

"He died with his boots on, being nipped in the bud by a dandy pilgrim he fooled with."

"That's so," was the universal comment upon this bit of history.

All being in readiness, the procession moved off toward Sinner's Hope Cemetery, just up on the slope of the mountain-side.

There were many head-boards there to mark the graves of those who had gone to join the great majority, and on some there was rare reading.

But all who died in Saw Dust City, except a Chinese, were given a head-board, and in fact there was one case in which a Chinese had once been so honored, for his employer, whose life he had saved, and who was a store-keeper, took out a tea-box with all its hieroglyphics upon it and placed this over the remains of the departed Celestial, daring any of his countrymen to deface it.

The procession filed by the "private lot" of The Triplets, who glanced at the eleven graves with a look of pride, and then turned their eyes wistfully over the crowd with a look that plainly said they wished some one would tread on their coat-tails and give them a chance to make the graves a full dozen.

And so Fanshaw was lowered to his last home, while a hundred hoarse voices sung Auld Lang Syne as the most appropriate thing that could be sung or done, there being no clergyman present to read the ceremony.

Then the red coffin was covered with the earth and the crowd broke up to return to the town and drink "Luck to the departed."

Before they all got out of the graveyard there were several fights, brought on as to who had killed a certain individual who had fallen with three bullets in his body some months before and the sight of whose grave had revived an old discussion; but, unheeding this little by-play, The Triplets walked toward their cabin to start on the trail.

"Pards," called Bunco after them, and halting, he came up.

"Remember, when you gits thar, and finds ther cliff whar thar is a big circle drawn on it, with a pictur' in the center, of a wolf having his paw on a human skull, and a hand p'intin' at it, you is ter put ther letter I give yer under ther loose rock on ther right hand."

"Then, while yer is in them mountains, you go thar and look under the rock every other day, and maybe you will find su'thin' ter interest yer, and maybe yer won't; but yer kin go all ther same."

"Now I bids yer farewell," and Bunco went on his way, while The Triplets hastened to their cabin, found that their horses were all ready for them, the pack-horse and extra as well, and good animals they all were, too.

"We'll be back when we comes, Skillet," said Long.

"Look fer us, Lick Skillet, when yer sees us," Short added, while Stumpy brought up the rear with:

"Yas, Chinee, when we gits back we'll be here."

Then off into the mountains they rode, the well-trained extra horse and pack-animal following.

When they got well on the way they pushed along a good pace, riding three abreast, and went into camp, their first night on the trail, just as Buffalo Bill, his second night out, was arranging in the canyon, through the timely warning given him by Deer-Eye Dick, to give Iron Grip and Johnny a reception when they should call.

This of course gave the scout two days' start of them, but then their business was not with him, as they supposed, for they had failed to see Buffalo Bill while he was in Saw Dust City, and so did not know the one they sought was alone on the trail ahead of them.

The next day, as it drew to a close and they were beginning to look for a good camping-place, a man suddenly appeared in the trail before them.

They halted, and their rifles were swung round for instant use.

But the man was alone and held his hands up in token of surrender.

"It are Hotel Johnny," said Long.

"Sure, it's Room Keys."

"Johnny it are of ther Sinner's Rest," added Stumpy.

"He lighted out with Iron Grip, arter they got ther lickin' from ther stranger; but what is he doin' here?"

"I dunno."

"Ask him."

Stumpy's advice seemed good, and so Long sung out:

"Room Keys, what is yer doin' here?"

"Pards, I is all undone, for I is alone in ther world, my dear pard, Grip, havin' been kilt,

and I are here as yer see, on foot and only myself."

It was a whining story he told of his misery, and he went on to say that they, Grip and he, had followed the stranger to get even with him and prove they were not cowards, and had ridden up and attacked him, just as he was leaving camp, when his horse fell, throwing him heavily and stunning him.

When he came to he saw that Iron Grip was dead, and the stranger had him tied fast.

"Then he took from me my horse and let me go afoot, as you sees, takin' Grip's animal and our pack-horse along with him."

"And he is ther man as layed out Fanshaw too?" asked Long.

"Yes, ther same."

"Well, he's a dandy, thet's all."

"He are, and yer'll think so when yer knows who he is."

"Who are he?"

"Pards, I seen his name on one o' his revolvers."

"And what was it?"

"Buffalo Bill."

The Triplets started, and for once changed color in surprise.

"No!"

"What!"

"Who?"

It was all they said, and Johnny continued:

"It are a fact, and in his scarf are a gold pin of a buffalo and with the name Bill set into it with diamonds."

"Thet accounts fer whar ther stranger did in Saw Dust."

"Yas, it explains how he were more than Grip and Johnny could handle."

"Thar's but one Buffalo Bill, pards, and we might hev knowed it."

Such were the remarks of The Triplets, and Long said:

"Johnny, we is goin' arter Buffalo Bill now, and if yer wants ter go yer kin mount ther extra horse, though we hain't got no saddle to offer yer."

"Bareback ridin' is better than walkin', pards, and I are most happy ter go, for ef you three takes ther trail o' Buffalo Bill, all I will hev ter do is ter sit by and see ther fun, though I is glad ter do all I kin."

"Yas, and yer'll hev ter, fer Buffalo Bill hain't no slouch, as we know."

"Now we'll find a camp fer ther night, and ter-morrer we'll start right on his trail and pick up ther end o' it as soon as we kin," and half an hour after the four were in camp, Johnny, as an ally, congratulating himself upon his good fortune, for now he felt that his revenge against the scout was assured, as The Triplets never failed when on the track of an enemy.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CHINEE FRIENDS.

WHEN Deer-Eye Dick left Buffalo Bill he rode rapidly on his way back the way which he had come.

His face soon wore a triumphant look, mingled with a certain recklessness that was called there by the knowledge that he had to face trouble on his return, in the anger of Red Tom.

He urged his good horse onward, at the highest speed he dared force him to, and held it until he reached a good place to rest.

Not thinking of his own fatigue, he bathed the nostrils of the tired horse, and gave him another rubbing, keeping it up for a long time.

Then the animal, greatly refreshed, was allowed a drink of water, and opening the saddle-bags, which he had wisely brought along, the youth took out a good feed of oats from them, and gave them to his horse.

While the animal enjoyed his repast, Deer-Eye sat down and ate his dinner, from food he had brought.

This done he lay down for half an hour's nap, and waking with a start found that he had slept more than an hour.

His horse had finished his oats, rested with a wallow and was cropping grass near.

Saddling hastily he said:

"Now, Flyer, you must go to the Mingo's before you rest."

And away darted the splendid horse on his long gallop.

While after mile was cast behind, but still the young rider kept him at his pace, and, as the sun began to throw long shadows across the valley he rode up to a neat little cabin that was situated back on the hillside, and had quite an air of comfort about it.

The settler was in a field near, and his wife sat in an easy-chair, looking like an invalid.

"Well, Mrs. Mingo, how are you?" said Deer-Eye Dick, as he leaped from his horse.

"I've been ill a week, but am better now, Dick; but you've ridden your horse almost to death."

"Yes, I've ridden hard; but I brought you something here you might relish," and the youth took from his saddle-bags a paper parcel.

"Oh, Dickie, you are so kind; but Red Tom sent out here for you awhile ago."

"Indeed!" and the boy's face slightly paled.

"Yes, he said you was wanted at once."

"Well, I will go on to the camp now; but can I leave my horse, and will you lend me one of yours?"

"Oh, yes, Dickie," and telling the youth to go out to the barnyard and take his pick of half a dozen there, he did so, and transferring his saddle from Flyer's back, was soon dashing along the ten miles into Saw Dust City as fast as his horse could go.

It was after sunset when he rode up to the stable, and the man in charge said:

"Deer Eye, Red Tom's fightin' mad about your goin', and he said if yer didn't tarn up ter-night he'd put a dozen men out in s'arch of yer."

"I'm here to save him that trouble— Hello, Hop Up!"

And he turned to the Chinese who had befriended Buffalo Bill and who just then confronted him.

"Tomee awfee madee, but don'tee get frightee," said Hop Up.

"No, Hop, I am not at all alarmed."

"Sha'n'tee hurtee you," added the Chinese.

And the youth went on into the store by the rear door.

A clerk was there, and he gave the cheerful information:

"Ther old man's goin' ter skin yer, Dick, fer he's mad as a wet hen."

Dick made no reply, but passed on into his own room, which was reached by going through that of Red Tom.

The store-keeper was not in, and after a while Dick put in an appearance at the store and let the other clerk go to supper.

Then he had his supper, and yet Red Tom did not appear.

At last he came and his face was black with fury.

"You kin git out fer ther rest o' ther night," he said to the other clerk, who hastily departed.

Then he closed the door, and turning to Dick, asked in a voice of suppressed passion:

"Whar has yer been?"

"To the Mingo's."

"You has not."

"I left there and came direct here."

"You did not."

"I have told you what I did."

"You went somewhar else."

The youth was silent.

"I say you did."

Still no answer.

"Tell me whar yer went."

"For a ride."

"Whar?"

"Along the mountain-trails."

"What for?"

"I will not tell you."

The words were uttered firmly and distinctly.

"What?"

And the man looked like a wild beast about to spring upon its prey.

"I have done no wrong; I went off on a ride for a special purpose, and I will not tell you more."

"Then I'll kill yer!"

He advanced as he spoke and drew his knife from his belt.

That he was mad with fury his writhing face and flaming eyes showed.

But the boy did not move, did not drop his hand on the knife or the revolver he wore.

He looked calmly in the face of the man and said slowly:

"Kill me if you wish, for better death than such a life."

He gave a howl like a wounded wolf and sprung toward the boy; but suddenly, out from behind a counter near sprung a lithe form, a knife glittered in his hand, and the blade was thrust to the hilt in the body of Red Tom.

Ere he could fall, for he was dead before the blade was withdrawn, he was caught in the arms of his slayer and dragged behind a counter.

Then came the words from the lips of the youth:

"Oh, what have you done?"

"Killee Redee Tomee," was the cool response of Hop Up, the Chinese.

"You have saved me from death, my poor Hop Up, but you will be killed."

"No stay and lettee Melican man killee."

"Hop Upsee no foollee."

"My good friend, you do not know from what you have freed me; but I fear for you, yes, and myself, too."

"Hop Up say comee wid he."

"He go to-nightee pretty quick to Buffalo Billee."

"He friend of Hop Up."

"What, is he your friend?"

"Muchee goodee friend of Hop Up."

"But you must fly now, for some one will come in soon and discover all."

"No, deadee man insidee there, and you close door for night timee."

"Hop Up brother nabeetwo horsee and readee now to go."

"You go wid brother and Hop Up?"

"I do not know what to do," said Dick, plaintively.

"Stopee to thinkee gettee hang up."

"True, and you shall not suffer for me, so I will close up the store and get you started."

"No go widouttee you."

"But you must."

"But wontee; stay rightee here and get killee allee same."

Dick stood in deep meditation an instant, the Chinese coolly looking at him.

Then he said, suddenly:

"He told me to come to him if I needed a friend, and I will do so."

Going quickly to the door he was about to close it, when two miners came in to buy a few things.

With perfect calmness he got them the articles.

"Whar's ther boss, Deer-Eye?" asked one.

"He's here," was the reply.

"I wants ter see him."

"He cannot come now, so drop in to-morrow."

"All right, Deer-Eye, anything to please you," and the men departed.

Instantly the door was closed behind them and barred.

Then the door leading into the hotel was locked, and going into Red Tom's room, Deer-Eye tried to open a trunk that was there.

"The keys are in his belt," he said, with a shudder; but he went out into the store, where Hop Up was hastily getting together a supply of provisions, and secured the keys from the dead man's belt.

Then he unlocked the trunk, which was a very strong one, encircled by iron hoops, and took from a box some papers, which he thrust into an inner pocket of his jacket.

Then he went to his room and secured a buckskin bag of gold, and some things he wished to carry with him, after which he joined Hop Up in the store.

"Gottee plentees for allee," said the Chinese, with a smile.

"There is a pack-saddle, Hop Up, and we will load it," and he took down from a nail where it hung a large pack-saddle.

Into it were placed provisions of various kinds, ammunition and the articles which he had taken from his room.

Then some canvas cloth, rubber and woolen blankets, and then heavy overcoats were strapped onto the pack, Deer-Eye saying to the Chinese:

"Half of this store belongs to me, Hop Up, for my money Red Tom put in with Bunco on shares, and I have a right to take what I wish and it is not stealing."

"Takee allee, no stealee," was the response.

"Now we are ready, and I must go out to the stable and get my other horse, Faithful, while I'll make the one I rode from Mingo's the pack-animal until I get there and change for Flyer."

"Melican man callee brother Lickee Skillee; he allee ready, too, ridee horsee for Hop Up."

"All right, we'll carry the pack out to the store stable, for no one is there."

So they took up the pack-saddle, Deer-Eye locked the door of the store, and they reached the stable without being seen by any one.

Securing his own horse, Faithful, from the Sinner's Rest stable, and the animal he had ridden from the settler's, he soon had them ready and rode away in the direction of the graveyard, while Hop Up ran off after his brother, who was none other than the cook left in charge of The Triplets' cabin, and who had not been at all backward in amply providing himself for the trip he contemplated making, with all that he found handy in the house or stable.

While waiting for his Chinese friends Deer-Eye sat upon his horse in deep and seemingly sad meditation, for he said earnestly, as he brooded over what had happened:

"Well, I did my duty by him, as I pledged myself to do, and he brought his death upon himself."

"Dead, dead! and now I can go my way; but I would have remained and faced the consequences but for that poor Chinese."

"Still, they might have killed me, and Bunco would have robbed me of my share in the store, so let it go as it is, and what I have with me keeps me from being a beggar— Ah! here come the Chinese."

A moment after Hop Up and Lick Skillet rode up, the latter leading two pack-horses, for which he apologized by saying:

"No comee back, takee muchee baggage."

"All right, it may come in well yet; but let us be off," and leading the way Deer-Eye set off up the valley toward the Mingo ranch, followed by his two Chinese friends, who each led a pack-horse which would have driven The Triplets raving mad, had they known that their belongings comprised the contents of the packs, and how particular their Chinese cook had been to secure only the best of everything to carry with him.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RETURN.

WHEN Buffalo Bill rode on his way, after leaving Johnny on foot in the mountains, his face wore the same calm look which no trouble or danger seemed to change or ruffle.

He could not but congratulate himself upon his having been warned by Deer-Eye Dick, for

he had not expected to be followed by the two men he had so severely worsted and left bound, though his natural caution kept him constantly on the alert.

With the horses of his foes, and his pack-animals, he had his hands quite full; but he felt that he could press on more rapidly.

Dividing the loads of the two pack-animals between the two riding ones of Johnny and Iron Grip, he made things more equal all around, and kept on at a good pace.

He halted an hour at noon, taking the trouble to be humane toward the animals by unsaddling them, and sought camp just at sunset.

The next morning he was on his way bright and early, and reached a point out several miles from the recent camp of the Hermit Trapper, in the mountain-top, about noon.

Here he halted in a thicket, determined to make no effort to reach the camp until night, for he did not know whose eyes might be upon him, nor was he sure that the trapper and Toby had not been surprised by the mysterious dwellers in that drear region during his absence of nearly two weeks.

But there were eyes upon him, from the cliff far above, and he had been in the thicket but an hour when he saw two forms approaching.

"The parson and Toby as I live!" he cried, with real pleasure, and he went forward to meet them.

It was indeed the old trapper and Sergeant Toby, and the meeting between the three was a most warm one, each of the two grasping a hand of the scout.

"Well, Buffalo Bill, my heart is glad to see you back again, for I had begun to feel most anxious about you," said the trapper.

"And right glad am I to get back to you, parson, I assure you, while you see I have not come empty-handed."

"No, sah, yer comes like Santer Claus, Massa Bill, and I guess yer hes been diggin' graves along yer trail, as I sees so many hosses," Toby remarked.

"Well, Toby, I have been so unfortunate as to have to take human life, in two cases, since I left, for even in self defense it is a sad thing to do, to kill a fellow being; but I will tell you the whole story around our camp-fire, and I can tell you we will live well, for I have a young store of provisions along, and enough to stock a small settlement in arms, ammunition and blankets."

"And we shall go on now to camp?" said the trapper.

"I halted here, parson, as I did not know just how things were up in the crater where you have your secret camp, and, besides, I did not know who might see me go there."

"So I intended to wait until night and then go on; but I must tell you that I am followed, and by three of the greatest desperadoes on the border, and they have no love for me, outside of their being paid to kill me."

"Only three?"

"Yes, parson."

"Lordy! we'll eat 'em up," said Toby.

"They will be hard fellows to digest, Toby, I assure you; but I drove them out of a company of scouts I once had because I caught them stealing, and soon after they shot one of my men, believing him to be me."

"Then I hunted them hot for a long time, but they escaped, and have been in the mines of late."

"And they's arter you now, Massa Bill?"

"Yes, and not so very far behind, I guess."

"We'll be here when they comes, and show 'em no mercy."

"If we capture them and take them to the fort they will be hanged without trial, for the many crimes they have committed; but I know the men, and it will be because they have greatly changed if they surrender even against big odds."

"But my idea is to ride on to the end of the trail, where we could never pick it up, parson, and there rest until night."

"That will take my trail that far, and I have been careful to leave it broad, so they could follow it."

"From there we will muffle our horses and ride back to your camp in the crater, and, leaving our pack-animals, return by dawn to be on hand to receive The Triplets, for that is the name they go under."

"A good plan, Mr. Cody; a good plan, indeed," said the parson.

"Yas, Massa Bufler; it's jist what sh'ud be did," Toby rejoined.

Then the parson and Toby mounted the horses captured from Room Key Johnny and Iron Grip, and all set off for the end of the trail.

It was nearly sunset when they got to the bank, where the trail ended by going into the surging river, and here they halted, while all set to work to make muffles for the hoofs of the horses.

These were made from blankets, and then, that there should be no brushing signs left by the scraping of a hoof several blankets were put along in a line, and upon these the horses were led, the parson leading them in single file and the scout and Toby keeping the blankets laid ahead.

It was not very fast work, but they kept it up

for an hour or more, having made little over a mile and come to some rocky soil where little trace would be left.

This they passed over and ascended the mountain by the regular deer-trail, the mufflers still upon the hoofs of the horses, and at last the mountain crater was reached.

The cavern, running back from the crater side, in under the tower-like rocks, was amply large enough to accommodate a regiment, and the horses therefore had ample space, while the numerous crevices gave light and air within.

In the smaller cave, which the hermit had used as his home, the pack-saddles were placed, and by the aid of the two lanterns of Johnny and Iron Grip and another brought by Buffalo Bill things were set in order, the stores were put away upon rocky shelves, the ammunition was safely disposed of, and there were blankets enough to give all a good bed.

"With that good spring of water in the crater, the plenty of grass that there is on the ridge, and the abundance of provisions and ammunition we have, we could spend months here, if need be, parson," said Buffalo Bill.

"Yes; and I remain here until I find my child or death calls me away."

"I'm with you, parson."

"Count me in too, sah," Toby added, while the scout said:

"Parson, I fell heir, by simply taking them, to the rifle and arms of one of the men who went from these mountains to Saw Dust City to get a list of provisions and to set a force from outside on me."

"I had gone by the camp of Gold Bug Mine and got a skilled workman there to weld the Silver Circle on my wrist, as you see, and I was passing off as one of the mysterious band, when who should turn up but a real member, one Fanshaw."

"He sought a quarrel and it ended in his death—there is his Silver Circle, you see?"

"Well, his rifle and revolvers are first-class, and I will turn them over to you, while those of Iron Grip, who lies in his grave back on the trail, Toby may have."

"Now we'll clean 'em all up, while Toby gets supper, and after we have had a few hours' sleep we will start for the trail, as I think my trailers will be along early in the morning."

This plan was carried out to the letter, and, after kindling a good fire in the mouth of the cave, to keep the wolves out of it and from attacking the horses, the three mounted and rode away in the early dawn.

They reached the spot Buffalo Bill had in view, for an ambushade, and making their selections of positions, sat down to eat their breakfast, after which they indulged in cat-naps until Buffalo Bill said, quietly:

"My friends are coming, for I hear the echo of their horses' hoofs."

"Yas, sah, and dere dey is, and dere is four of 'em," said Toby.

"Yes," and putting his field-glass to his eye, Buffalo Bill continued:

"One is Hotel Johnny, whose life I have twice spared."

"He should beware of odd numbers."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE AMBUSH.

As the four men, The Triplets and Hotel Johnny, as he was also often called, rode along the trail of the scout, and came near the Haunted Mountains, they became very cautious.

Long, who was the best trailer, went in advance, and on foot, his horse following behind obediently.

The other two of The Triplets, Short and Stumpy, rode to either side, examining every sign, and Hotel Johnny brought up the rear with the pack-horse.

The latter realized fully the danger of his position, should the scout by any means triumph.

He knew that patience might cease to be a virtue with Buffalo Bill, as far as he was concerned.

Under no other circumstances would he have dared to follow up the daring man, for revenge or gain, but that he was in company with three such men as were Long, Short and Stumpy, The Triplets.

Their reputation, and the hope of surprising the scout, gave him courage.

The fact was that, like all bullies, once their pride and power are broken, they become cowed, and where Johnny would have before fought half a dozen men, he was now afraid of his own shadow.

So he was content to hang back with the pack-horse, and yet he kept a keen eye behind him, for fear of a surprise in that direction.

As for The Triplets, they were in their element.

They had, as the scout had told the trapper and Toby, been scouts under his command; and though good trailers they were bad men.

They had committed crimes in partnership, such as murdering, running off stock, stealing horses and playing road-agent, so they leagued together for protection.

With a score against Buffalo Bill for discharging them, and that they knew he had

sought to hang them, they were anxious to wipe it out, and they said in chorus:

"We'll take him alive and hang him, and see how he likes it."

Together they feared no one man, and with Johnny as a reserve, while they fought they would face many times their number, provided Buffalo Bill was not against them as one of the number.

Knowing him as they did they determined to use strategy, and they entered the mountains with all their wits about them.

He had left them a broad trail, and they had gone into camp for the night little over half a score of miles from the Hermit Trapper's crater camp on the mountain-top.

There was one thing that caused The Triplets a little anxiety, and to Johnny much anxiety, and that was the stories they had heard about the mountains being haunted.

They knew that many of the tales must be false, and yet they were aware that Indians would not go there as they claimed that evil spirits dwelt there.

They knew men who had seen strange sights in those mountains, of a weird and spectral nature, and yet they were sure that men dwelt there who were not ghosts.

They were, like all wicked men, superstitious, but they had not the wild dread of the supernatural that had come over Johnny since his downfall.

Where they looked for a good lurking-place for a foe, Hotel Johnny regarded it as a good nook for a spook to come out of, and he kept his eyes rolling about on all sides, from the moment they entered what was properly known as the Haunted Mountains.

Starting at early morn, they came up the valley only a couple of hours after Buffalo Bill and his comrades had taken up the position in ambush.

The spot chosen by the scout seemed to be a natural ambushade.

It fronted the cliff, on which was the strange and mystic sign of the Silver Circle, and it held a position so that one approaching the riverbank, where the trail so abruptly ended, must come under the range of the rifles of the party in hiding.

The place was a pile of rocks, overgrown with stunted pines, and rising like an oasis out of the meadowland about it.

There were canyons running into it that an army-wagon could pass through, and in one of these the three horses were staked out to short ropes, all ready to mount hastily, while their riders held a good position among the tree-fringed rocks forty feet above them.

It was from this formidable lookout that Buffalo Bill saw the enemy approaching.

For himself the scout hated an ambush, and liked to go fairly out and face a man.

But the question at stake in this case was a most serious one.

He argued that he had come here alone to see what the mystery of those everlasting hills was.

He had met there an old man, gone mad from grief, and he had heard his story, believed it, and saw with pleasure that hope had brought back the wandering senses.

He knew that one Carter Creighton had deeply wronged that poor old man, and all his sympathies were enlisted for the one, all his hatred against the other.

He knew that Carter Creighton, known as Don the Monté Man, had stolen the old parson's beautiful grandchild and had her in hiding somewhere there, if she was yet alive.

Some strange mystery kept that wicked man in the mountains, and he had gathered around him others, doubtless as wicked as himself.

To keep others away, the scout felt that the Monté Man was at the bottom of the mysterious phantom-like deeds done there.

It was therefore his intention to solve these mysteries, to rescue the old parson's Wild Rose, if in his power, and to bring Don the Monté Man to justice.

In this he was to be thwarted by three men whom he knew richly deserved hanging, and one whose life he had at one time spared.

Weighing all these considerations in his mind, Buffalo Bill felt that there was an excuse for his going into ambush, especially when a death of one of their party might lose all, and that there were four against three.

Besides, after these men had been gotten rid of, there were the Silver Circle band to hunt down and capture.

"If we can wipe out The Triplets and Johnny in one clean sweep, we need not fear the phantoms, for, after what you tell me, parson, of seeing but five, and what I picked up, I do not think we have over half a dozen, all told, to go against," the scout had said, as they waited for the coming of the trailers.

And now the trailers were in sight, coming on slowly, feeling their way, watchful, cautious, cunning, as those men well knew how to be.

The eyes of the three in ambush were upon them, and a stern smile rested upon Buffalo Bill's face, a look that was almost merciless.

Nearer and nearer they approached, Long half a hundred yards in front, and directly on

the trail of the scout, Short a hundred feet to one side, Stumpy as many more on the other, and Hotel Johnny bringing up the rear.

They looked like army skirmishers in their cautious advance, and when Long was on foot, the others were mounted.

Presently Long stopped and his eyes were upon the pile of rocks.

His cunning eye saw at once its advantages for an ambush, and he conned it closely.

The others halted as he did.

Then he took his field-glass and scanned with the utmost patience every part of it.

Still he seemed not satisfied, though he saw nothing of a suspicious nature.

Then he looked at the distant cliff, and its weird circle painted upon it, and examined the open space leading to the river between the cliff and the massive, impassable rocks on the right.

It seemed too open there, on either side, for an enemy to find a lurking place; but the oasis on his left he did not like.

He heard the roar of the river as it surged along, and doubtless thought that where the trail forked it there was a shallow crossing, and still keeping his eye upon the suspicious pile of rocks on his left he once more moved on, and his comrades followed as before.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A DUEL ON HORSEBACK.

As the trail left by Buffalo Bill bent to the right, toward the open space leading to the river, the trailers followed it slowly, though each one had somehow gotten an idea of suspicion that all was not right in that pile of tree-fringed rocks on the left.

At last Long reached the steep bank of the river, and the narrow space between the steep rocky banks on the right, and the Silver Circle cliff on the right, bringing all nearer together, they four were soon assembled upon the end of the trail, where it broke off at the river.

"Pards, no man or horse ever went over thar and lived," said Long.

"Not much, fer ther stream goes along like a drove o' Texas bronchos," Short said, while Stumpy rejoined:

"It do look like certain death to go over thar."

"Yet ther trail comes here," put in Johnny.

"Yas, and tarns back, too."

"Whar does yer see ther tarn?"

"Thar is so, ther trail comes right here and stops."

"This is ther end o' it."

"Ther scout hes committed suicide right here."

"Ef he hes rid his hosses off here inter thet stream he hev."

"Buffalo Bill hain't of a suicidin' nature, pards."

"What then?"

"Thar is some mystery here we can't git onter, any more than we kin pick up ther ends o' thet trail."

"What's ter be done?"

"Camp and talk it over."

"This are a hard camp-ground."

"We'll find better over yonder," and Long pointed to the rocky oasis.

So they talked, each one giving his views, and all at a loss to discover the mystery.

Leading the way, Long went to the cliff, and there they stood gazing at the strange device painted upon its rocky wall.

"Pards, wait here until I takes a sarvey o' yonder bit o' rock, for it may hide a ghost, and may hide a man as kin make ghosts o' human bein's."

"Arter I has tuck a look thar, we kin go inter camp, and then we can reconnoiter pretty snug about these parts, and more, I knows o' no better camp ground fer us then right over yonder among them bowlders which is piled up so permiscuous."

"Wasn't thar su'thin' said by Bunco o' a letter rock here?" asked Stumpy.

"Yas, and I'll put ther letter thar now, fer thet must be ther rock," and he pointed to a rock upon one side, which seemed to have fallen from the cliff above.

He raised it and placed beneath it the letter given him by Bunco.

Then he mounted his horse and rode toward the ambush, leaving the others watching him.

He approached with caution, his rifle ready to fire, if he sprung up any dangerous game.

Buffalo Bill, the parson and Toby watched his approach, and then the former said:

"Parson, he's but one, and it's against my feelings to fire at one man from an ambush, for it's akin to murder."

"You are right, Buffalo Bill."

"Scotch a snake anyway, Massa Bill, for dey's dangerous," said Toby.

"Well, I'll ride out and meet him, and you can remain here, both of you, and fire on the others as they come up."

"All right, Coby."

"I only wish I had ridden Comrade, my own horse, instead of Iron Grip's as I did, and then I would be certain of catching any of them if it comes to a chase; but I don't know how the horse I have runs," and Buffalo Bill drew back from his position, scrambled down the rocks,

and was soon mounted upon Iron Grip's horse, which he had ridden to give Comrade a needed rest.

Seating himself well in the saddle, and with his rifle in hand, he rode to the edge of the canyon and suddenly dashed out.

But in the mean time the desperado had changed his position, going around, as though to circle the rocks, and make his approach from the rear.

Thus it was that the scout looked in the wrong direction for him, just where he had seen him last, while Long, with his eye hard upon the mouth of the canyon, saw him as he dashed out into the open meadow.

Instantly the desperado threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired, just as a yell of warning came from Toby, who saw that the scout had not seen the man where he had expected, and naturally supposed he had gone in the opposite direction.

With the crack of Long's rifle, down went Buffalo Bill's horse, shot through the brain, while yells broke from the other two Triplets as they spurred toward the scene.

With the sudden fall of his horse Buffalo Bill in vain tried to catch himself on his feet, and hampered as he was by his rifle, he was pinioned down by one leg under the body of the dead brute.

To extricate himself, even possessed of his giant strength, before Long was upon him, Buffalo Bill knew was impossible, and so he drew his revolver quickly and fired.

Even in the situation in which he found himself, his nerve had not deserted him, and his aim was true, for the arms of the desperado were thrown upward, the rifle dropped from his hands, and he fell heavily from his saddle.

In the mean time the parson and Toby, seeing the misfortune of their comrade, had fired a shot each at long range, toward their other foes, and then hastily descended to the canyon and mounted their horses.

They dashed out in time to confront Short and Stumpy coming viciously on directly toward Buffalo Bill, who was making gigantic efforts to get out from beneath the dead body of the horse.

"Take the fat one, Toby, and parson, you try and catch yonder fellow, for I'll look after Short," called out Buffalo Bill, and his revolver cracked as he spoke, while Toby had kept up a rapid fire upon Stumpy from the moment he was told to do so.

Short's horse dropped at the scout's fire, and his rider fell and rolled over and over, but he was upon his feet in an instant, and rushing upon Buffalo Bill.

Together their revolvers cracked, and the weapon of Buffalo Bill fell from his left hand, with which he had fired, the bullet of the desperado having struck it squarely, and thus been checked on its way to the scout's brain, for which it was going direct.

But Short had fired his last shot, as he staggered a few feet, dropped his revolver, stumbled, recovered himself, fell to his knees, arose, drew his knife and made a supernatural effort to reach the scout.

Seeing that his foe was hard hit, Buffalo Bill did not fire again, though he had drawn his other revolver, and a moment after the brave but wicked man sunk down within a few feet of his enemy, crying out savagely:

"We die, Buffalo Bill, and you live."

He could say no more, and half supporting himself on his hands he remained thus an instant and then dropped down on his face.

In the mean time Toby had spurred directly for the third and last of The Triplets, who, though he had seen his comrades go down, was not unnerved, and sent a bullet so close to Toby's face that it stung him.

But Toby was a good shot, too, and he wounded the desperado, breaking his right arm; but quick as a flash Stumpy drew a revolver in his left and returned the compliment by clipping a piece out of the soldier's shoulder.

They were now almost upon each other, and to dismount his enemy, the brave black spurred his large horse directly upon the smaller animal.

With his weight added the shock was terrific, and Stumpy and his horse went down, while Toby's horse barely saved himself from a heavy fall.

Wheeling instantly Toby sprung to the ground and advanced upon his foe.

But though the horse had risen, his rider remained motionless.

"Bravo, Toby! the Desperado Trio have been wiped out; but come and help me out of my scrape, for the parson has gone off after Hotel Johnny and may need our aid."

The negro ran to the scout's assistance, and their united efforts extricated him from his most painful position.

"Ther three of 'em is dead, Massa Bill, and de parson am hot arter de man yer calls Hotel Johnny."

"Yes, Toby, and we must go after the parson, for that fellow is a snake and may play some trick of being dead and turn on him."

"He knows he rides for his life now," and Buffalo Bill sprung upon Toby's big horse, call-

ing to him to catch Stumpy's animal and follow.

When Hotel Johnny saw that the trouble had begun, he edged down the trail, to get a fair start, if it was necessary to run for it.

Leading the pack-horse he rode along, and yelled with delight when he saw Buffalo Bill's horse go down and pin him under him.

But he became livid as he saw Long, the best man of The Triplets, fall, and putting spurs to his horse he urged him on, cursing the pack-horse for not following faster.

When Short went down under the fire of the pinioned scout, and he saw the parson coming for him, Hotel Johnny felt that he had made a mistake in coming to the Haunted Mountains, and letting go of the pack-horse he fled for his life.

Once he glanced back, with the hope that Stumpy might redeem the day; but what he saw caused his teeth to clatter, as Toby was just riding the last of the trio down.

The parson too was coming on swiftly, though Hotel Johnny was delighted at seeing that his horse was the fastest and gaining rapidly.

"I may yet escape, for Buffalo Bill's leg must be broke," he murmured as he sped along.

"Yes, I will escape, for night will come on, if I can only leave them far behind, and then I'll git away, I knows I will," he whined.

"I war a fool ter come, fer I might hev know'd thet thar were no man as c'd kill Buffalo Bill," and the man was livid with fear.

He had no saddle, only a blanket fastened around the horse, and he urged the animal with knee, voice and spur.

The parson had not fired upon him, he was surprised to see, when he could have done so at first, as he was in good range.

And he too had not fired on the parson, as he now recalled, and he cursed himself for his forgetting that he really had arms.

Then, as he drew further away he grew braver, and bitterly reproached himself that he had not charged when Short and Stumpy had done so.

"If I hed gone then, why it would hev settled it, for if two of them went down, t'other and me c'd hev held ther trumps, and we'd hev been pards, and less ter divide spoils among."

"But it's too late ter talk now, and all I hes ter do is ter git, and I'm doin' it ther best I knows how."

And on he went, with the parson far behind now, and no one else in sight, so he began to congratulate himself that he had for a third time escaped from Buffalo Bill, when he rode into a canyon, through which the trail ran.

Hardly had he done so, when he uttered a yell of terror, for he saw that he had dashed into a hornet's nest, figuratively speaking, for he had run full upon three horsemen, and their attitude was hostile in the extreme toward the fugitive desperado, who, flying for life, seemed to have come face to face with death.

CHAPTER XL.

CHINESE ON THE WAR-PATH.

WHEN Deer-Eye and his two Chinese friends started away from the mining-camp of Saw Dust City, they fully realized the danger they were in.

Did Bunco, who had the keys of the store, go into it, he would doubtless find the body of his clerk, for Red Tom was little more.

Did any of the miners happen to notice that the Bonanza Palace store was closed sooner than usual, it would surely cause Bunco to go and discover the cause.

The body found, it would at once be traced to Deer-Eye as the murderer.

Then Hop Up had not been seen in the hotel that afternoon, and he was known to be very friendly toward the youth.

The discovery made, pursuit would follow quickly, and lynch law would be the result, for the hot-headed miners would kill the boy and the Chinese first, and try them afterward.

With this knowledge of their fate, it was no wonder that they pressed rapidly on to the Mingo Ranch.

The honest settler was called up, and Deer-Eye, feeling that he could trust him, made a square statement of the facts.

Flyer had been well cared for in the mean while, and the half-dozen hours of rest he had had put him in fair trim again, so the pack-saddle belonging to the youth was taken off of Settler Mingo's horse and transferred to one of the animals which Lick Skillet had brought.

As Flyer was to go light, it was not thought he would retard their ride.

With kind words from the settler and his wife, they started, Mrs. Mingo calling out:

"If they come this way, after you, Dickie, we'll send them on a false trail."

Deer-Eye raised his sombrero, and the little party started off at a canter.

Thus they threw the miles behind them, walking their horses up and down the hills, going rapidly upon the level land, and stopping about every half-hour to rest.

Just at dawn they went into camp, the horses were stripped of their trappings and allowed to roll and feed, while Lick Skillet got a hearty breakfast.

A rest of an hour, and once more they pressed on.

At last they came to the place where Deer-Eye had met with Buffalo Bill, and from here they took the trail, the youth showing at once that he was a good plainsman.

The tracks of the two trackers were also seen and Deer-Eye saw that they were pushing on after the scout's trail, and he felt anxious, fearing they might have gained the mastery by cunning and treachery, even after his warning.

The camp of the scout, in the little canyon, was found, and the grave, covered with logs, showed that some one had fallen.

Deer-Eye did not dare take the time to find out who it was, but as the trail went on toward the Haunted Mountains, he hoped that it was a sign that the scout had been victorious.

Had the desperadoes been, they would doubtless return to Saw Dust City to regain their lost prestige, the boy decided.

The trails of The Triplet party were now visible, and Deer-Eye was anxious to press on, as much for the safety of the scout, as for himself and the Chinese.

The horses were given all the care they could get under the circumstances; but they were kept constantly moving, and Deer-Eye began to feel, that, if the body of Red Tom had not been discovered until the next morning, it would be some hours after that before there could be a party put upon their trail, and with a night's start he did not fear being overtaken.

Could they reach the scout, he had no fear of any number that might come in pursuit.

He knew well, however, the nature of the miners; how they saw a man shot down in their midst, and he was not arrested, or punished, unless some comrade took up the quarrel and killed him, yet, if a man was slain, and no witnesses were there to see fair play, and the killer escaped, he was almost immediately hunted down that lynch law might be dealt out to him.

With the trails of Buffalo Bill and The Triplets before him, Deer-Eye Dick had no trouble in finding his way, and he saw how much more rapidly he was going than either party ahead, by noting their camping-places, and pushing on to one still further himself.

At length the grand, weird mountain region was reached, and Deer-Eye felt that those ahead could not be very far off.

He wondered just what the situation was, and, if after having defeated Iron Grip and Hotel Johnny as he hoped, he should be slain by The Triplets.

Warned as he was, Buffalo Bill must be on the alert, and so Deer-Eye hoped for the best.

The boy was a crack shot, and both Hop Up and his brother handled both pistol and revolver well, while that the former was a dangerous hand with the knife, Red Tom was a departed example.

If attacked therefore Deer-Eye felt that they could defend themselves, and he felt little anxiety on this score, though he seemed to dread to have to fight, though that he was utterly fearless in nature was evident from his face.

So at last the mountains were reached, and the party encamped at night in a wild spot, having passed some hours before the last camping-place of The Triplets.

The camps told Deer-Eye Dick that Buffalo Bill, if indeed it was he that was leading, and not the two desperadoes, was some distance ahead of The Triplets, and had entered the mountains in ample time to find a refuge there from his pursuers.

Deer-Eye was happy in feeling that his journey must soon end, for he had not only put himself to a severe physical test, but he had driven the horses hard and they were beginning to show it.

As for the two Chinese who answered to the strange names the miners had bestowed upon them, they took the hard ride most coolly and seemed to show no fatigue whatever.

They were asleep in the saddle most of the time, while Deer-Eye followed the trail, not waking up often until a halt was called.

But in camp they were busy as bees, getting wood and water, looking after the horses and cooking, while they seemed to wish Deer-Eye to leave all to them, and in this way he got some very refreshing naps during a halt.

Early the next morning they were up and moving along upon the trail.

They had gone along for several hours, when suddenly they heard distant firing.

Instantly Deer-Eye called a halt.

They were in a deep canyon, with sides like a stone wall, and along the base on either side a growth of stunted trees.

There were boulders here and there, too, and after listening to the shots an instant, and seeming that way, Deer-Eye fell back to a group of boulders, where the three were a little thicker than elsewhere.

The pack-horses were quickly hitched in a safe place, the Chinese were left in charge and Deer-Eye rode forth upon a reconnaissance.

He reached the mouth of the canyon and halted, for he saw far in the distance a horseman approaching at full speed.

He knew that he must come through the canyon, so wheeling, he rode back at a gallop.

It was not the scout, he had seen at a glance, but he had not recognized just who it was.

"We will head that fellow off, for I believe The Triplets have attacked the scout and he has sent them flying," he said to his two comrades.

"Allee lightee, we headee off," was the complacent rejoinder, and they smiled as if it was already done.

Seated on their horses they waited, and to their ears came the rattle of flying hoofs.

A few moments more and there dashed into sight a bareback horse and rider.

"Bad 'Melican man!" cried Lick Skillet.

"Muchee had Johnnee," echoed Hop Up, who recognized him at a glance.

"Yes, it is Room Key Johnny, and he looks as though he had seen a ghost."

"I was in hopes that Buffalo Bill had killed him; but we must stop him."

Out from behind the boulder spurred the three, and then it was that Hotel Johnny gave a yell of terror undisguised.

He tried to dodge by on the other side of the canyon, but saw that he was headed off.

He started to turn back, but the clatter of hoofs behind him stopped that intention in short order.

Then he grew desperate, drew a revolver in each hand, and, in his fright, begun to fire at random.

Deer-Eye raised his revolver, but dropped his hand again, saying:

"No, no!"

But if any conscientious scruples disturbed him about firing upon the desperado, the Chinese were not troubled that way, for Lick Skillet, a skillful thrower of the lasso, sent the rope flying through the air, while Hop Up at the same time opened fire.

The result was a natural coincidence, for the noose of Lick Skillet's lariat settled over the head of the flying horse, upon which the Chinese had a business eye, while the bullet from Hop Up's revolver perforated the body of the unfortunate wretch.

"I catchee hossee!" yelled Lick Skillet, with delight, as he brought the animal to his knees, while over his head went the desperado.

"Me killee 'Melican man," shouted Hop Up, with equal enjoyment, as he saw that Hotel Johnny did not rise.

"Oh! what a life this is," sadly said Deer-Eye, as he rode toward them, and asked, quickly:

"Is he dead?"

"Heapee dead."

"Goodee hossee, badee 'Melican man," were the responses he received.

A moment more and the Hermit Trapper dashed into the canyon, and at sight of them he drew rein and brought his rifle round ready for use.

CHAPTER XLI.

WELL MET.

WHEN the Trapper Parson dashed into the canyon he was certainly surprised at the sight of three horsemen ahead of him.

He had heard the rattle of the revolvers but indistinctly as he sped along, and supposed they came from behind him and that one of The Triplets had escaped and was being chased by Toby.

But at sight of three men on horseback in the canyon he drew rein, while a glance showed him Hotel Johnny on the ground and his horse in the lariat-noose of his captor.

The sun shone in his eyes, and shading them with his hand he took a better look, for age was beginning to dim his sight.

As he did so he saw one of the men ride toward him.

If they had slain Hotel Johnny they surely could not be hostile to him, he thought.

Then he supposed they might be some of the mysterious band who haunted the mountains, and he prepared to greet them as foes, if such they should prove.

Deer-Eye saw this, and recognizing the old trapper whom he had seen at the store several times after his coming there, he called out:

"Ho, parson, we are friends!"

"It's Red Tom's young clerk," said the trapper to himself as he rode forward, and he felt that he had no trouble on his hands, as he had always liked the youth.

"Well, lad, this is a strange meeting between us away up here," he said, as he grasped the outstretched hand of the youth.

"It is, indeed, sir, and right glad am I to meet you, for I was looking for Buffalo Bill, who I heard was your comrade in these mountains."

"Yes; and a noble comrade he is, too, and back up the valley, where we had a battle with those Saw Dust City Triplets, Cody's horse was shot and pinned him to the earth, but I hope he is not much hurt."

"I sincerely hope not, sir, and we will go to him at once."

"But who are your companions?"

"Two Chinese brothers, one having been a servant in the Sinner's Rest and the other the cook of The Triplets."

"They have served me well, and I owe my life to one of them."

"Come, boys, I wish to introduce you to my friend, the Trapper Parson."

"Me knowes him; nicee man; see him heapee often," said Hop Up.

"Yes; muchee good 'Melican," added Lick Skillet, while the old trapper grasped their hands warmly.

Then Deer-Eye told how they had left Saw Dust City and pressed on to find Buffalo Bill, until they had had Hotel Johnny dash upon them and upon his death.

"It is sad to see man die thus; but he deserved his fate, and rather than he should escape to bring others against us, as I feared, I meant to track him to the end, for he rode too fast for his horse to last long, and in these mountains I am at home."

"But come, for I am anxious about the scout, and we will ride back, while you men can come on with the body, for there are more to bury."

"Goodee wolf-meat," suggested Lick Skillet, with a glance at the body of Hotel Johnny.

"No, he must be buried, boys, and you can throw the body across one of the horses and bring him along up there, for you would not like to have the thought that when you died your body would be left to the wolves," Deer-Eye said.

"Hop Up die, don't care if wolf havee pick-nickee wid him," answered Hop Up, but he added, as Deer-Eye rode off with the Hermit:

"All lightee, we fetchee."

A moment after, as they examined the body of the dead man, to see how many of Hop Up's bullets hit him, they were glad that they had decided to bury him, for they found considerable that was of value stowed away in his capacious pockets.

So they transferred the findings to their own pockets, threw the body across his horse and strapped it there, and getting the other animals, started on after Deer-Eye and the trapper, who were now half a mile ahead.

In the mean time Buffalo Bill was coming thundering down the valley in chase of the trapper and the desperado, and came in sight of the former, returning along with a companion.

At first he supposed it was Johnny a prisoner, and said:

"The parson has roped in Johnny, and now I'll rope him up, for this is his day to die—no, it is not Hotel Johnny, but—as I live it is that splendid boy who gave me the warnings that have saved my life."

"He has been discovered in what he did, and has had to light out and hunt me, and right glad am I."

The trapper and Deer-Eye gave a shout at seeing the scout coming, so glad were they to see that he was not seriously hurt, and when they met the greeting was a warm one.

"Well, my lad, what brings you up into these weird hills?" said Buffalo Bill.

"I came to seek you, sir, and I have friends with me, who, like myself, were forced to fly for our lives," and then Deer-Eye Dick told the story of all that had happened, and with deepest interest the scout listened, and the Chinese coming up as the youth concluded, Buffalo Bill gave them a hearty greeting in his characteristic way, while he added:

"If any pursuit is made of you, Deer-Eye, we'll stop it very soon, which, with our present force, a parson, a colored soldier, a store clerk, two Chinese, a scout, plenty of horses, and provisions to throw to the birds, we can clean out every ghost and Silver Circle mystery in these mountains."

"I tell you, pards, we have come here to stay, and I intend to find a bonanza right here, you mark my words."

"But come, we must look after the dead and then take care of the living," and they all turned back up the valley, while Toby, who saw them coming, said to himself:

"Sergeant Nicodemus Toby, am you takin' leab of your eyesight, or am dere five men in yender party, and nine horses, instid of two men and t'ree horses, as dere sh'u'd be, fer in course Massa Buf'ler hev kilt dat man as runned away, as he's back so soon?"

"No, dere's plenty of 'em, and I guesses thar's goin' ter be business in these parts."

So Toby stood, like a triumphant black knight on the battle-field, awaiting the approach of the party.

They soon came up, and Buffalo Bill made Toby acquainted with his new friends, telling all how gallantly the sergeant had charged upon Stumpy and annihilated him.

The dead were soon collected, the Chinese brothers making a diagnosis of the pockets of The Triplets, and all were placed in one grave among the rocks, while the parson, raising his hands, said solemnly, as a prayer:

"May God have mercy upon their sinful souls!"

"Amen!" responded Buffalo Bill and Deer-Eye Dick, in a low tone, while Hop Up and Lick Skillet remained silent, blandly smiling, and Toby remarked *sotto voce*:

"I can't say dat, fer ef de Lord hab marcy on dem willians, I is likely ter meet 'em above, and I don't want ter see 'em any more."

Having "wiped out" their pursuers, the party moved down the valley and up to the Crater Camp, where the two Chinese were at once installed as major domos of the culinary department and to look after the animals, as that was more in their line, while the others were to devote themselves to solving the mystery of the Silver Circle, after a couple of days' rest, which all needed, the scout having been bruised up considerably by his fall.

"As soon as we get our horses and ourselves in shape, I have a little plan on hand to carry out, that I think will take us to the camps of the Silver Circles," said Buffalo Bill, and his words caused his hearers to feel that he knew more than he had thus far let them know.

CHAPTER XLII.

A STRANGE TRAILER.

SEVERAL days passed away in perfect rest, up in the Crater Camp, as Buffalo Bill called the bowl-like camping-place of the parson.

The scout had been a little worsted in his fall, and he needed the rest he got, while the horses that had come on from Saw Dust City also needed time to recuperate.

The two Chinese seemed in their element, in the camp, cooked meals that would have tempted a Jesuit, and held no fear of danger as long as Buffalo Bill was there *in propria persona*.

Deer-Eye had been considerably fagged out by his arduous trip, and, like the scout, was willing to rest.

The parson and Toby went off on guard duty, each day making a trip, to discover if any party from Saw Dust City had pursued Deer-Eye Dick, but no one was seen, and the scout gave it as his opinion that the pursuers had not gone far from the camps, if indeed pursuit had been made.

"Now, parson, let me know if you have seen the Dumb Pards," said Buffalo Bill on the evening of the day before operations were to be begun in earnest.

"No, Buffalo Bill, not once while you were away did we see them."

"I guess they got a lesson last time, as far as their owner was concerned, for he has kept them back, that is certain."

"I spoke to Toby about not having had another glimpse of the Dumb Pards, and we were greatly in hopes we could be able to capture them and surprise you upon your return; but I fear they were lost the night you followed them so boldly into the river."

"I think so too, Massa Bill," said Toby.

"I am sure they were not; but I have a little plan on hand to find out just where they went."

"How can you?" asked the parson.

"Yas, Massa Bill, how yer gwine ter find that out?"

"I confess to a curiosity to know also your secret, after all I have heard of those remarkable Dumb Pards," Deer-Eye Dick remarked.

"Well, to explain, I will say that you all know that when the Dumb Pards failed to get through with their message, that a man was sent as a messenger, from this mysterious leader of the Silver Circle League."

"I went to Saw Dust City, as I deemed that was the point communicated with, and I determined to solve the mystery."

"I did so, aided by chance and circumstances, to a limited extent, for I discovered that there was a regular communication between some one in these mountains and Bunco, the Landlord of the Miner's Rest Tavern in Sawdust City."

"I discovered that the man Bunco alone knew the secret, excepting some minor matters which Hotel Johnny had wormed out of him or gleaned by stealth."

"The man who came down from the mountains as messenger, was Fanshaw, who forced me to kill him."

"He brought word that Bunco was to lead a force of picked men from outside to track me, and you and Toby, parson, to death, as our being in these mountains caused him uneasiness."

"Fanshaw led Bunco to suspect me, in spite of my having my wrist encircled by the Silver Circle, or I could have gleaned more information, in fact, all I cared for."

"But I had had a lesson and was anxious to get away, fearing another messenger from these mountains."

"Deer-Eye here heard the plot of Bunco, to send the Triplets up here to search for me, and Hop Up overheard the arrangement of Hotel Johnny and Ira Grip to kill me."

"To Deer-Eye I owe my escape, and we are pards for life, and he has but to command me at any time to see that I will respond to the death."

"Here's my hand on it, Deer-Eye," and Buffalo Bill grasped the hand of the boy who had instantly extended it at the words of the scout.

"Thank you, sir. I am glad to have served you," said the youth.

"Now, I am no robber, pards," Buffalo Bill continued:

"But I did take the traps of Fanshaw, and for a purpose."

"That purpose was to get his horse, which is a splendid animal, as you can all vouch for."

"But he is more; he is one of the Silver Circle League!"

All looked at the scout in surprise.

It was clear that they did not wholly grasp his meaning.

He smiled and said:

"I see that you do not understand me, so I will say that if Fanshaw was of the Silver Circle League, he knew where the retreat was."

"Well, if he came from that retreat he came on horseback, and that horse brought him."

"I see," said the parson, thoughtfully.

"It's blacker ter me, Massa Bill, than my face is," Toby remarked, greatly bothered.

"If the horse came from the secret haunt, he can go back there!"

"If he brought Fanshaw from the retreat, he can carry me back."

They all understood then the bold purpose of the scout, and Deer-Eye said:

"We can all follow you, sir, and surprise them."

"No, Deer-Eye, never jump in the dark."

"It is my belief that the Silver Circles have but very few men, and still they may have many."

"We cannot tell."

"Den dere's de ghosteses," suggested Toby, and all laughed, for the sergeant was in earnest.

"Now I will start to-morrow night, mounted on Fanshaw's horse, and give him his rein for the secret retreat."

"I will go slow, reconnoiter every step as I go along, and when I have found the place, I will return, and if advisable we can go another night and give them a surprise."

"If they are far too many for us, I will go to the fort and get my scouts, and then the mystery will be solved; but my idea is that, if we work in the right way, we can accomplish this without outside help, and so much the better."

It was argued that Buffalo Bill should not go alone, that he should allow the parson or Toby to accompany him; but he said one to reconnoiter would be best, while, if they wished, the parson, Toby and Deer-Eye could go with him as far as was practicable and there await his return.

This was decided upon, and that night all retired to their blanket couches, feeling hopeful that the mystery would very soon be solved regarding the Silver Circle, the fate of Wild Rose, and that of Sol and the Black Canary, whom Buffalo Bill felt assured had disappeared through the agency of Don, the Monte Man, who had kidnapped the parson's grand-daughter.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

It was just after sunset, and after having enjoyed a generous supper, that Buffalo Bill, the parson, Deer-Eye and Toby rode away from the Crater Camp.

Much to their satisfaction Hop Up and Lick Skillet were left in full charge, and, as all hands had worked to make a high log fence at the several breaks where wolves could get in, and which effectually kept them out, they had no dread from this source, so settled themselves down for a confidential chat upon their boyhood days in China, and how much they longed to be sent back there—when they died.

Upon reaching the valley Buffalo Bill rode in advance and gave his horse the rein.

It was the animal which Fanshaw had ridden, and he immediately took the trail up the valley which led to where it had been lost at the river-bank.

"It is as I thought, he'll find his way," called back Buffalo Bill, to the three riding behind a few paces.

On the horse went, past the scene of the fight with The Triplets, straight to the steep bank, and had not the scout checked him he would have leaped madly into the stream.

Drawing rein, however, Buffalo Bill awaited the coming up of his comrades.

"He knows his way, as you will see."

"You had better await me until dawn, and then return to camp."

"Good-night."

All wished him good-luck, and he again gave the horse rein.

Instantly he went over the bank into the torrent of waters, the scout holding his rifle and pistols above his head.

Down the current they swept, and were almost instantly lost in the darkness.

Determined to rely wholly upon his horse, Buffalo Bill gave him a slack rein, and he soon saw that he was swimming toward the other bank.

But that was a wall of rock, too, and yet the scout felt assured there must be a landing.

They swept by the landing on the right bank, and soon after the horse's feet touched bottom and he waded shoreward toward the left bank.

A crevice in the wall-like bank was wide enough for him to go through, and as he ascended to the plateau above the moon rose and lighted his way.

The scout realized fully the danger of his situation, going as he did upon unknown ground, and where he was well aware that his presence in the mountains was fully known.

But Buffalo Bill was one who risked his life in any good cause, and he felt that the rescue of the kidnapped Wild Rose was a sacred duty.

His way led upward over an open space, the horse seeming to follow an imaginary trail, and he let him have his rein, knowing he would go as his instinct led him.

Up to the base of a mountain range he went, and here the horse half-turned one way, then paused, turned back and went toward a break in the range, as Buffalo Bill could see by the indentation in the tree-tops.

He was somewhat surprised at the action of the horse, but allowed him to have his way, while he muttered:

"There are two trails, and he was at a loss which to take."

So on the horse went toward the mouth of the canyon, and was going into it when Buffalo Bill drew him to a halt, and dismounting, hitched him to a tree, determined to go on foot, as he felt that he was getting into a dangerous neighborhood.

He discovered after a short walk that the canyon opened like a huge gateway, crags towering on either side standing for posts.

It was scarcely more than sixty feet wide, and the tops of the sides were heavily wooded.

Like walls the sides arose on either side fully a hundred feet, growing higher as they went toward the top of the mountain range.

Entering it with caution and keeping on one side, he passed along for some distance, the canyon narrowing as he did so until it became a mere chasm between walls of hundreds of feet in height.

The scout paused, for the moonlight showed him that the chasm passed into a large canyon or valley beyond.

"If there is a guard he will be here," said Buffalo Bill, and he walked slowly up toward the chasm.

As he did so he saw the glimmer of a light upon the rocky wall.

This was a warning for him to go ahead with the greatest caution.

Approaching in a noiseless manner he soon saw that the light shone out of an open door of a cabin or hut.

It was a small shanty, situated just beyond the narrow gateway into the narrow canyon, and peeping in the scout saw a man seated in front of a fire smoking.

A log on the hearth was flickering, and it lighted up the cabin when every now and then it would burst into a blaze.

There was no one else visible in the room as far as the scout could see from where he stood, and there was no conversation to indicate the presence of another than the one he saw.

As the firelight flamed up brightly Buffalo Bill saw that the man was dressed in miner garb and wore a black slouch hat, while about his waist was the inseparable belt of arms.

"I guess he's alone," muttered the scout, and he glided forward and reached the cabin door.

The moonlight showed him a canyon some fifteen acres in size, with a perfect wall of rock around it, while in the further end over a high cliff bounded a waterfall from the towering mountains overhead.

"That stream has an outlet somewhere," said Buffalo Bill.

And he then threw his rifle forward, and covering the man in the cabin, said sternly:

"Hands up, pard!"

The man started to his feet, dropped his hand upon a revolver-butt, and would have drawn it, when the words came again:

"Hands up, I say!"

He did not see the one who uttered the threatening command and he obeyed, for he knew that he was covered.

Instantly Buffalo Bill stepped into the cabin, advanced toward him, and in a moment he was disarmed.

"Buffalo Bill!" groaned the man.

"Reuben Minor!" the scout remarked, recognizing the man.

"Yes, we know each other, and I suppose my end has come," the man remarked, dejectedly.

"Reuben, you are wanted at the fort for the murder of Corporal Case, and other little irregularities, and I am right glad to meet you again."

"I'm done for!"

"So it looks just now, Reub."

"How on earth did you get here?"

"Rode part of the way, swam some little and walked the balance."

"I told them you'd find out the secret," the man said, excitedly.

"Told who?"

He made no answer.

"Who is it you complimented me so highly to, Reub?"

"No one."

"Don't be silly, Reuben, for you have lied enough in the past to tell the truth for the rest of your life."

"I cannot tell, Bill."

"You can."

"I dare not."

"You must."

"I am under pledge."

"You have broken a thousand pledges in your time."

"I cannot break this."

"All right."

"Bill, if I should break this pledge, my fate would be far worse than you can imagine."

"Worse than hanging?" was the significant question.

The man shuddered and answered:

"Yes, yes, far, far worse."

"Reuben Minor, you know me?"

"I do, Bill Cody."

"You know that I am a man of my word?"

"I do."

"You will believe what I tell you?"

"Yes."

"Well, Reuben, I tell you plainly I came into these Haunted Mountains to find the ghosts that scare people away, and it is my intention to carry out my purpose to the letter."

"I found your secret way here, and I have a number of friends in these mountains, who will aid me to set ghost-traps and catch every spook in them."

"Now I have gotten this far, and I have found you."

"Yes, Bill, you've got me caged."

"I always liked you, Reub, when you were in old Lightfoot's sutler-store, and I never thought you really bad at heart, though I knew you dodged the truth as you did the chaplain."

"When Corporal Case was killed no one suspected you, at first, for Sergeant Foley was arrested as the murderer."

"Circumstantial evidence pointed to Foley, and he would have hung for it."

"But I suspected you, and though Foley does not know I did so, I aided him to escape, for I was sure of his innocence."

"You left the fort the day after the murder, and all seemed well for you, until some weeks after, you remember, while scouting, I went into an Indian camp and the chief had a pair of pistols which I recognized as having belonged to the dead corporal."

"He told me a white man in a distant settlement, had sold them to him for a pony."

"He described you, and I went to the settlement, and one night I met you, and I heard you tell your pals, for you were drinking the story of the corporal's murder."

"You mentioned no names, not even said he was a soldier, but you gave yourself away."

"I intended to arrest you that night, when a friend met me there and I told him about you, and he was to help me, for it was a dangerous lot of men you had taken refuge among."

"He went to get you off by yourself, told you my plan and demanded money for it, which you gave him, and you escaped, knowing at last you were known as the murderer of Corporal Case."

"Oh, Bill! it's all up with me," groaned the man.

"Reuben, I have you a prisoner, and I know that you fled here and joined a band in these mountains, and you have either to go back with me and hang, or you are to make a clean breast of what I wish to know."

"Sergeant Toby is with me here, and he shall be your guard, so you may be certain you cannot escape."

"Bill, I'd like to tell you all, but my fate would be too awful to contemplate."

"Worse than hanging, I ask you?"

"Yes, far worse."

"What would it be?"

"I'd be tied on the back of an old horse, whose feet would be hobbled."

"I would be bound hand and foot, a white robe put over me, the horse would be led to the valley and turned loose at night, and I would be devoured by wolves," and the man seemed appalled at the prospect.

"Ah, that would be a fearful fate indeed; but you would have to be known to be a traitor first."

"Yes, and I am thoroughly trusted."

"I see; but let me tell you, Reuben Minor, that the fate you speak of shall be yours, if you do not do as I say."

"Ah, God have mercy!"

"If you do," calmly continued the scout, "I will let you go your way in freedom, so you seek a home far from here, and I pledge you no harm shall befall you."

"Not for the murder of Corporal Case?"

"No."

"You will not take me back to the fort?"

"No."

"But let me go free, and protect me from—"

"Who?"

"Those who would harm me?"

"I will."

"Then I will do as you say, Bill."

CHAPTER XLIV.

BETRAYED.

"REUBEN," said Buffalo Bill, impressively, after the man had promised to betray the secret he held:

"I come here, as I told you, to clear up this mystery, and there is no escape for you, for, did you play me false the entire garrison should be put on your track along with all my scouts."

"Serve me well, and you go your way in peace."

"I will, Bill."

"You swear it?"

"I do."

"Am I in any danger of being found here?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Certain."

"This is a guard-post?"

"Yes."

"Are you the only guard?"

"Yes, at this post."

"What do you guard?"

"The canyon."

"Is there a camp in it?"

"Yes."

"Who is in that camp?"

"Two people."

"Come, be more explicit in your answers."

"Who are they?"

"A woman and a boy."

"Prisoners?"

"Yes."

Buffalo Bill's face lighted as if an idea struck him.

"Who are they?"

"Prisoners of the chief."

"The woman's name is Clarice Creighton, and—"

"You know her?"

"The boy she calls Sol?"

"Yes, I see you know them."

"They have been here two years."

"It is true."

"And prisoners all that time?"

"Yes, Bill."

"I wonder that they are alive."

"Oh, they haven't been in close confinement, Bill, only at night I lock them in their cabin."

"Is it far from here?"

"No, yonder under the shelter of the cliff, and they have made a cosy place of it."

"You see there are but two ways of getting out of this canyon, for the lowest part of the wall is over a hundred feet, and a squirrel could not get foothold upon it, so there is no danger of their escape, for they cannot pass by me, and if they go by the other outlet they have got to go under the mountain, through a tunnel made by the stream that tumbles over the heights up yonder."

"Then they would find themselves in another canyon, a small one, strangely like this one, only wilder, and there is where the chief and men live."

"I see; but I should think that in two years, if they are not in irons, they could have found some means to escape."

"No, Bill, for they have no weapons, no horses, no food, and what would two persons thus situated do on foot in these mountains?"

"Why, Bill, they would starve or be torn to pieces by wolves the first day out."

"Then I lock them in their cabin at sunset, and let them out in the morning."

"And you are their only guard?"

"Now I am, for we take turns by months."

"How far is the other canyon from here?"

"Over a mile, going under the mountain tunnel, and much more round outside."

"The trail divides a mile from here, out on the plateau, one going there, the other leading here?"

"Yes; you've got them down fine, Bill."

"Do you keep a horse here?"

"Yes, he is back of my cabin."

"And each man who stays here as guard keeps his horse?"

"Yes."

"Who was the guard before you?"

"His name was Frank Fanshaw."

"I thought so."

"Do you know him?"

"I did."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead."

"No!"

"Yes; he was on duty here about three weeks ago?"

"Yes; but how came he to die, Bill?"

"I killed him," was the simple reply.

The man started and became very pale, but asked:

"Where was it, Bill?"

"In Gold Dust City; but now to your band."

"Bill, I'm doing that for which I'll suffer if it's known."

"You remember our terms, Reuben?"

"I do, and I'll act square, Bill Cody, as I hope you will by me."

"You know that my part of the compact shall be kept."

"And I'll keep mine, so fire away," the man said, in a reckless way.

"Your band is known as the Silver Circle?"

"Yes."

"You have a silver band on your wrists?"

"Yes, see?" and the man exposed his wrist.

"It is like mine," and the scout showed his.

The man became livid and shook as though with a chill.

"What ails you, man?"
 "Bill, you have ruined me."
 "What do you mean?"
 "You have joined our band, and the chief has sent you here, to see if I would betray him, and I have done it."
 "You talk nonsense, for I have not seen your chief, nor do I know him."
 "Honest?"
 "Truly."
 "Yet you wear the Silver Circle."
 "Yes, I got it from the wrist of a poor fellow whom the wolves tore to pieces."
 "Yes, it was Bandy, who was plotting to betray the secrets of the mountains, and he met his fate, as I will, if what I tell you is known."
 "And, Bill, there have been more like him, for now and then a man flies up against the captain, and the result is he is fed to the wolves."
 "Well, I had this silver band welded on to help me gain my point, and it has done so, though it came near getting me into a scrape, as Fanshaw appeared where I was playing the Silver Circle on Bunco, of the Sinner's Rest tavern in Saw Dust City."
 "Now you know why I wear it, so I wish you to tell me all I wish to find out."
 "As I said, Bill, go ahead, but don't scare me, for I got a fearful shock when I thought you were one of us."
 "How many are there in your band?"
 "Seven now, counting me."
 "Your captain is known as what?"
 "Captain Don is the only name I know him by."
 "He came here about two years ago?"
 "Yes."
 "And he is in camp with his six men?"
 "He is."
 "What are they doing here?"
 "Hunting for gold."
 "And they have struck a bonanza?"
 "Bill, let me tell you something?"
 "Well?"
 "The captain got hold, in some way, of a map, drawn by a man who had ventured up here alone and found a gold mine."
 "Then he organized a band of fourteen, besides himself, and came here, and set out to find the mine, according to the map."
 "We followed the trail laid down, and a dangerous one it was, and struck upon a silver mine."
 "It paid us well for a few weeks, coming out in solid ore, and the captain sent down to the settlements and had a number of bands made for our wrists, with nothing to do but to weld them together after we put them on."
 "Then the silver mine gave out, and work as we might we could get no more, so we went on the hunt for the gold mine, which we knew was here somewhere, for we had all seen it on the map."
 "But somehow the map had gotten lost and no one could find it, so we had to hunt, and we are yet hunting for the mine, which we saw marked on the map as one that would pay fortunes to the diggers."
 "We have found dust here and there, and we send it down to Bunco to get rid of; but we have not found that bonanza mine yet, though the captain leads old Bunco to believe he is laying up gold here by the ton."
 "So you get but very little gold?"
 "Very little, Bill."
 "And you lost your map?"
 "Yes."
 "Did not some of the men steal it?"
 "Not one, or if those we suspected did they died before they'd tell the truth, for the captain set the wolves on them, as we call being sent out to be eaten up by them."
 "And still he stays here and hunts?"
 "Yes, but the men have lost heart, and grow discontented, and to check their humor the captain has lately talked of killing any man who says a word against remaining."
 "I see."
 "But he must wield a great influence?"
 "He does, Bill, for he knows the story of every man in his band, while we know little about him."
 "Let me ask you if he has not another prisoner than the boy and woman of whom you spoke?"
 "No."
 "Buffalo Bill started, for where was the parson's grand-daughter, he wondered?"
 "You are sure?"
 "Yes."
 "There are only those two prisoners, and your seven in the camps?"
 "Yes, excepting our Girl Queen."
 "Who?"
 "Our Girl Queen."
 "Who is she?"
 "The sweetest little being in the world, a girl of only about fifteen, and the only creature I believe the captain loves."
 "Some of the boys say she is his daughter, and yet I feel she is not."
 "He brought her here with him one day, for he left us here soon after we all arrived, and was gone some days."
 "She seemed sad at first, but got cheerful

after awhile, and she rides like a Comanche and can outshoot any man in camp."
 "We men idolize her and call her Queen Rose, and she rules us all; but the captain will not let her leave the canyon, for fear of her being lost, or killed by wolves, he says, and she obeys him in that, and even does not know about the Don's prisoners I am guarding."
 "I have thought it would be pleasant for her to meet them; but the captain said the man who told her should die, and so we keep silent about them."
 "And the girl seems happy here?"
 "She does and she does not."
 "The captain makes her believe we will find a fortune, and then he will take her to the city and let her go to school and see the world, so she lives on hope."
 "She has books he has sent for for her, a guitar, a bugle, which she plays better than any regimental bugler I ever heard, and she amuses herself as best she can; but I have feared that the captain meant some day to force her into a marriage with him; but here he has to treat her as a fine lady, for if he did not the boys would kill him, much as we fear him, and he knows it."
 "I am glad to hear this, Reuben, and it goes far in your favor," said Buffalo Bill, secretly delighted at the joyful tidings he had in store for the old parson.
 After a few more questions of slight importance, regarding the Girl Queen, Buffalo Bill said:
 "Now, Reuben, I desire to see your prisoners."
 "Oh, Bill!"
 "I mean it; I must see them to-night, and you can lead me to them."
 "But, Bill, I—"
 "Here, I will go alone, and not let them know I have seen you, so give me the key of their cabin."
 The man obeyed, and tying the man, as Buffalo Bill said, that he'd be sure to wait for him, he walked toward the prisoners' cabin under the shadow of the cliff.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE COIL TIGHTENING.

WHEN Buffalo Bill went to the cabin under the cliff of the canyon where the two prisoners were said to be, he felt no fear of the man, Reuben Minor, whom he had securely bound.
 He had bound him as a precaution, fearing he would change his mind, ambush him upon his return and kill him.
 Did he once arrange with him to be his ally in future operations, he knew that he could trust him, but for the present he wished him to feel that he was master of the situation.
 The cabin he approached was a snug little home of three rooms, with little beds of wild flowers about it, an arborlike piazza along the front and an air over all that the occupants wished to make the best of a bad situation.
 Giving a gentle knock at the door, the scout heard a voice within answer:
 "Who is there?"
 "A friend."
 "I know no friend here."
 "I am a friend, and I do not care to have it known that I am here."
 "Pard," and a voice from another room spoke, "we don't receive no visitors at night."
 "Uncle Sol, did you ever hear of Buffalo Bill?" asked the scout, feeling assured that the last speaker was the boy guide.
 "I has, and who hasn't?"
 "Well, I am Buffalo Bill, and I have come here to rescue you from the Silver Circle League after your two years of imprisonment."
 "Glory!"
 "Thank God!"
 The first exclamation came from the room in which was Sol at a window, and the next from the door where the woman stood.
 "Dress yourselves quickly, and I have the key, for I took it from the guard, who is now bound securely in his cabin."
 A hasty toilet was made by the woman, and she said:
 "Come in."
 She had lighted a candle, and the scout unlocked the door and stepped in.
 Handsome, sad-faced, yet stern she looked, and she gazed earnestly upon the splendid-looking man who entered.
 "You are Buffalo Bill," she said, earnestly.
 "Yes."
 "And you is for a fact, for I seen yer once."
 And Sol entered, having grown considerably in the two years since the reader last beheld him.
 "And you have come to rescue us?"
 "Yes, madam, and have been in the valley some time trying to find this secret retreat."
 "In a word, I found here an old trapper parson, whose grandchild had been stolen from him by Don, the Monté Man."
 "That man?" cried the woman, anxiously.
 "Yes, and he brought her here."
 "He had slain her father, procured a map of a gold-mine he had found here, and so he came here to work it, organizing a band to help him."

"What he is to you I know, as I do that his name is Carter Creighton, and that, when you visited Saw Dust City in search of him, he fled, and more, he had you and this brave boy kidnapped and brought here."
 "And he is here?" she asked, in a voice full of amazement.
 "He is Chief of the Gold-Hunters' League, and not a mile from you, and has been for two years."
 "I felt that I owed our capture to him, and was to be kept out of the way, but I supposed he was far from here."
 "On the contrary he has kept you near him."
 "We will meet now," she said, with a dangerous gleam in her eyes.
 "It is my intention to come for you to-morrow night, so be prepared to start at a moment's notice."
 "I shall come soon after nightfall, and have horses for you both."
 "Why not to-night?" she said, dejectedly.
 "I will tell you."
 "I am alone to-night, and must return to my friends down in the valley below."
 "I shall bring them with me to-morrow night, and you shall be rescued quietly, and go with one of our party to a place of safety."
 "Then I shall move against the Silver Circles, going to their camp through the tunnel under the mountain."
 "Can you go that way?"
 "Yes, it runs through to the other valley, beyond yonder range."
 "If we had but known it."
 "It would have only been your death, for on foot, unarmed and without food, you would soon have been dragged down by wolves."
 "Yes, that is true, and these mountains seem full of the terrible beasts."
 "I shall ask you, Sol, to join our party in an attack, for I have but four others I can call, and we will have to fight half a dozen desperate men."
 "Now you is jist layin' out a picnick fer me, Mister Bill," said Sol, with enthusiasm, and the scout felt that the boy would enjoy the fight to his heart's content.
 "Now I must leave you, but be ready by to-morrow night, and all will be well."
 "Good-night."
 "One moment, sir," said the woman, as the scout turned to go.
 "Let me tell you in a few words that I know all the black history of Carter Creighton, and you must not kill him, for brave men die in battle."
 "Keep him for the hangman's rope."
 "He was in love with his fair cousin, Nellie Creighton, but she loved Roy Ripley, a charity student, but who was a noble, splendid man."
 "She was an heiress, and she was discarded for marrying Ripley, and then they came West and joined his father, a clergyman, who had hidden himself upon the border and gone to trapping."
 "Carter Creighton sought to marry his cousin, and get her money, when he was already my husband."
 "He thought that he had killed me, for one night, while we were hastening home along the beach, as a storm was coming up, he dealt me a stunning blow, bound me hand and foot, and put me in a frail skiff, shoving it off from the shore."
 "The storm broke in fury, and, but for an accident, that he had by chance gotten hold of a life-boat, I would have been lost."
 "I was blown out to sea and picked up by a vessel bound around the Horn to China."
 "It was nearly ten months before I set foot on land, and then in a foreign country."
 "The captain was kind to me, but he was poor, and finding I could do nothing as a woman, I cut off my hair, donned male attire, and went before the mast as a cabin boy."
 "It was years before I could work my way back to America, going from vessel to vessel; but at last I did so, and I found my parents dead, and Carter Ceighton had my inheritance."
 "They had believed me dead, and had willed the property to him, after which I discovered that he had caused their death to get it."
 "Suspected of it, he had fled, and keeping the secret that I was still alive, I determined upon revenge."
 "Then I set out to find the man who had so wronged me."
 "I am possessed of a wonderful voice, and I took that as a means to pay my way, singing from place to place, and really making money."
 "At last, after long years of search, I heard of a man in the mines, a gambler, whom I believed to be Carter Creighton."
 "I at once began to go the rounds of the camps, and found him at Saw Dust City, or rather was put in the room he had there, for he fled that very day, and I am confident he saw and recognized me."
 "I got this youth to be my guide, and we started to search through the camps, and had I found him, I was so revengeful, that I determined to proclaim my wrongs, and I knew those rude, but good-hearted men would quickly bring him to justice by lynch law."

"He knew I was on his track and thwarted me, and here I have been ever since."

"You say he has a fair girl prisoner."

"It is the daughter of Ripley, and his lovely wife, and she has inherited her mother's large fortune, as I know, and search has been made for her by the lawyers, so that Carter Creighton knows this, and more, he intended, I am sure, to marry her, girl though she is, and get his revenge, and her money."

"Now, sir, you know my story, and I beg you to forgive me for detaining you, when your life is in such danger."

"I am glad to have heard your story, madam, and in fact knew something of it, from some papers I took from the things that both you and the Don left in the hotel room at Saw Dust City, and which I will place in your hands."

"Now I must say good-night, and expect me to-morrow night."

Locking the door Buffalo Bill returned quickly to the cabin, and said:

"Reuben, I wish to say that your prisoners know all, and if you have a mind to serve me, I will set you free to-morrow night, give you a good outfit and let you go your way, as soon as you have signed a paper that you killed Corporal Case, so as to clear poor Toby wholly of the charge."

"If you attempt to play me false, I shall know it, and if you do not believe it, just try to pass out of this canyon to-morrow by this outlet, or the one leading into the other canyon."

"Do just as usual all day to-morrow, and when night comes I will be here with all my comrades, and then you having done your duty I will keep my pledge."

"Now I shall leave you, and I ask you again, do you intend to play me false, or not?"

"Bill, I see salvation through you, and the worst kind of a death the other way."

"I'll act square."

"I believe you, Reuben, so now let matters go as usual, and do not speak to the prisoners about having seen me."

"All right, Bill," and the man walked down the canyon a short distance with the scout, who soon after reached his horse and started at a rapid pace back to join his comrades."

Reuben Minor had told him how to return, by entering the river where he had come out, and the horse would swim across, when, by keeping close to the other bank he could wade up to the landing, where the Dumb Pards had left the stream when Buffalo Bill and his companions had lassoed them."

Following these directions he approached the rocks, where the parson, Deer-Eye and Toby were camped, and gave a hail.

Instantly they were on their feet welcoming him warmly.

"It's all right, pards, the mystery of the Knights of the Silver Circle is solved, so now back to camp," he called out, and as they rode along he told them of the discoveries he had made, the horse having taken him straight to the secret retreat.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SILVER CIRCLE BROKEN.

LICK SKILLET and Hop Up did not remain in camp the following night, for they went along as a part of the "army," going to solve the mystery of the Silver Circle.

The scout rode Comrade, Deer-Eye was on the back of Flyer, Toby rode his best horse, the parson was mounted on the animal that had shown the way to the secret camp, and the two Chinese had the steeds which had belonged to The Triplets, while both Hop Up and Lick Skillet led a horse, one for Sol, the other for Clarice Creighton.

All were armed to the teeth, and there were rubber blankets brought along in which to wrap the firearms while in the river.

Reaching the "jumping-off place," Buffalo Bill said:

"Parson, as I know the way I will change horses with you for the swim down the river, and lead the way."

The change was made and the scout at once went over the bank and took the plunge, Comrade following promptly, Flyer immediately after and the others in turn, not one of the well-trained and plucky animals faltering at the jump.

They breasted the waves most nobly, reached the shallow water upon the other side, landed, passed through the narrow crevice in the bank and were soon going along at a canter across the plateau.

Reaching the canyon the scout went on in advance until near the cabin, when he dismounted and leaving Comrade to wait for him, crept along on foot to within sight of the door of the little hut.

He saw Reuben Minor pacing to and fro, evidently in an anxious mood, and he said:

"He is true this time, and I am glad for the sake of all that he is."

"Ho, Reuben!"

The man started and came quickly from the cabin.

"Is that you, Chief Cody?"

"Yes."

"All is serene here."

"I am glad of it; but I will go back for my companions."

He went down the canyon, Reuben Minor accompanying and gave a whistle.

Soon the others rode up and the scout said:

"Comrades, this is Reuben Minor, of whom I spoke, and he is on our side now."

"No killee Reuben?" asked Hop Up, as though it would give him pleasure to do so.

"No, for he is on our side, Hop Up," the scout said with a smile.

"Allee lightee, killee somebolly elsee," was the philosophical response.

Then they all rode into the canyon, to the cabin of the prisoners, and Reuben Minor quickly unlocked the door.

Sol was known to the parson and the two Chinese, and a warm greeting followed between them, while the scout said:

"Mrs. Creighton, these are my friends, who have come with me to rescue you."

"Heaven's blessings upon them will not be more earnest than my thanks," she said in a voice that quivered.

"Now, madam, you can mount a horse we have brought, and Lick Skillet and Reuben here will be your escort, while Sol joins us in an attack upon the camp, and you can ride back to where you will be wholly safe."

"Bill, I will have to guide you through the tunnel, and you will need what aid I can give you in the attack, for the Don and his men are a hard lot, and are fighting to keep off a gallops, you know."

"Well said, Reub, and I will accept your services, though I did not wish to ask you to fight against your comrades."

"And, sir, why can I not follow, at a distance, alone, and allow the other one who was to be my escort to aid you, for then there will be but seven against six, none too great odds?"

"Thank you, madam, I will be glad to have it so, and, as I remember, you have seen something of a rough life, I will arm you, for we have an extra pair of revolvers."

Clarice Creighton seemed well pleased, and mounting, the party set off, the Knight of the Silver Circle and Buffalo Bill leading.

Going across the canyon, which was a garden of beauty, they reached the other side where the stream, which fell from the heights at the canyon's head, ran into an arched tunnel under the mountain.

"It will be dark here, and as your horses are not acquainted with the way, I'll lead, and run my lariat back for you all to hold onto, so you can follow, for a mistake in the path will throw you into the river," said Reuben.

This was done, and all holding to the lasso, in single file, rode into the black tunnel, on a narrow shelf running on one side of the water-course, which surged through the cavern with an ominous roar.

It was a ride that would test the courage of any one, and Toby but expressed the thoughts of all when he said:

"I is mighty awful glad I has got hold o' dis rope, for it's mighty nice comp'ny ter feel others is near yer."

Through darkness that was intense, with a dripping archway above, a slime-covered wall upon one side and which they often touched, and the surging stream not three feet away upon the other, they went on their way, the horses seeming impressed with the situation.

At length a glimmer of light was visible ahead, and soon they rode out into the other canyon.

It was a place of the wildest grandeur, overhanging by towering mountains, with crags, canyons, cliff and mountain-streams bounding hundreds of feet upon all sides.

It looked weird, solemn and appalling in the moonlight, and was strangely different from the gardenlike canyon beyond.

Up toward the end of the canyon were half a dozen huts scattered here and there.

Pointing to one that stood a little apart from the others, the guide said:

"Yonder is the home of Queen Rose, and you must look out for her, as she is a dead-shot and plucky as an Indian."

"And the chief?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Lives in yonder cabin on the right, nearest to the Girl Queen's."

"And the men?"

"Are in the next two cabins, the others being used for store-houses."

"And there is no guard?"

"The one at the canyon gate of the other valley where I was is the only guard we keep here, for there is no danger of being surprised, or at least we have always thought so, though I told them, Chief Cody, when I heard you was in the mountains, that you'd find us—and you have."

"And you stood guard only to prevent the escape of the prisoners from the valley?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will take the cabin in which is your chief, and you, parson, go to the one where Queen Rose is, and my word for it she will not shoot you."

"Reuben, you lead Toby and the others to the two cabins where the men are, and you had better knock, tell them who you are, and get

them to let you in so you can then cover them with your revolvers."

"Nobody keeps their doors bolted or barred here, Chief Cody, so there will be no trouble about getting in."

"So much the better, and we may take the party without loss of life on either side, as I desire to do."

"As for the men who are here, I can only look upon them as miners, unless I recognize some of them as old offenders, unless they aided in turning those poor fellows out to be killed by wolves."

Their captain is different, and he must be taken alive, so, Reuben, go with me and you call him to the door, and I'll see to the balance, while, Toby, you and Hop Up go to our cabin, and you, Deer-Eye, Sol and Lick Skillet to the other, to keep the men inside until we can secure the chief."

"Perhaps my going, sir, will show a still larger force, and it will be that much in our favor, so permit me to go with Sergeant Toby and the Chinese, as they are but two," said Clarice Creighton.

"And, Buffalo Bill, as soon as I have seen my dear child I'll come to your aid, you may be sure, and so let me go on first, as it may be best."

"Well, parson, go ahead, for it is not a bad idea," and a few moments after the trapper departed, Buffalo Bill led the others to the attack.

It was with a heart that almost ceased to beat that old Parson Ripley went toward the cabin, which he had been told held the one who was dearer to him than all else on earth.

Could it be that his years of bitter grief were now to come to an end, and some joy at least be in his heart during his declining days?

Reaching the cabin, and he approached it as noiselessly as an Indian, he tapped gently on the door.

"Who is there?" said a sweet voice within.

"Rose, have you forgotten old Grandpa Ripley?" and his voice quivered.

Instantly there was a stir within, and a few moments after the door was thrown open, and the moonlight shone full upon Wild Rose, grown into a beautiful girl of fifteen.

She had hastily thrown on a loose wrapper, and seeing before her one whom she had parted with two years before, whom she loved as father, mother and all, she gave a glad cry and sprang into his arms.

One fond embrace, and then he said quickly:

"Rose, dress yourself quickly, while I go and join my friends, for we have come to seize these men here—nay, nay, I can say no more now, for time is precious, and we must save human life if possible."

He kissed the wondering girl and turned away, to, a moment after, join Buffalo Bill, who was at the door of the cabin which Reuben said the chief dwelt in.

"Now call," said Buffalo Bill, calmly, addressing Reuben Minor.

Instantly he tapped upon the door, and said in a low voice:

"Ho, Captain Don, I have news from Bunco."

"Ah! come in, and light a candle there on the table," came the answer.

Reuben entered, leaving the door ajar, and lighted the candle, when suddenly Buffalo Bill sprang into the cabin, his revolver leveled at the man lying upon the bed, while he commanded:

"Surrender, Captain Don, or you die!"

He attempted to get up, to reach his hand to his belt of arms hanging near, but the flash and report of a revolver came, and his hand dropped, the bullet having passed through his arm.

"Now, sir, surrender!"

"I do," said the man, in a sullen tone.

"Who are you?" he added.

"Men call me Buffalo Bill," was the quiet response.

"And that man has betrayed me?"

"My dear sir, I came to your retreat unaided, save by the horse which belonged to your desperado comrade, Frank Fanshaw, whom I was forced to kill."

"Your men are prisoners, alike with yourself, and where little may be proven against them, you are wanted on various charges," and the scout aided his prisoner to dress, and then looked after his wound.

It was a flesh wound, the ball having passed through the fleshy part of the arm, below the elbow, and, with a skill gained by much experience in a life on the plains, Buffalo Bill dressed it, and then turned to the sergeant who entered, and asked:

"Well, Toby?"

"All the others, sah, is tied tight, fer dey put up dere hands mighty quick when I tole 'em I had de whole United States army outside."

"All right, Toby; please bring the prisoners in here and collect all of our party outside of this cabin, and have them remain until I call for them."

"Yes, sah."

"Now, Don, the Monté Man, I wish to have a little talk with you."

"Why have you dogged me here?"

Before Buffalo Bill could reply Toby returned with the other prisoners, five in number, and

white-faced they took a stand at one end of the room.

It was evident they were intensely amazed at what had happened.

"My men," said Buffalo, "I wish to see if I know any of you as villains," and he glanced down the line.

They were hard faces that he looked into, but he did not recognize any one.

"No, I do not remember to have seen any of you before, but you have been caught in bad company, and must go to the fort with me as prisoners.

"If you can prove your innocence, well and good, and if not, you will have to suffer."

"We hain't done nothin'," said one.

"No? Well, your looks belie you; but suppose you tell me who tied the poor wretches on the horses and turned them loose for the wolves to devour?"

"The cap'n."

"He did it all?"

"Yas, he did, for we wasn't goin' ter help do that which might be done to us," said the man who acted as spokesman.

"That's square, Chief Cody," said Reuben Minor.

"All right, it is another nail in the Don's coffin.

"Now, men, I wish to show you just what your leader is.

"He tried to murder his wife, by setting her adrift at sea in an open boat, and he came West upon account of his crimes in the East.

"He is a card-sharp, and has cheated many a poor miner out of his hard-earned dust, and, finding a successful rival out on the border, happy with his wife, the woman who had refused this man's love, he killed her husband, robbed his body, and it broke the heart of the poor wife, and left their child an orphan.

"He knew that the man he had killed had found a gold-mine, and had a map of it, and he sought the house, where the dead man's father and child lived.

"He pretended friendship, and in that way got the map, and then organized this band, under the name of the Knights of the Silver Circle.

"He found some silver here; but it was the rich gold-mine he looked for, and in some mysterious way he had lost the map of how to find it, and has kept you here, digging and hunting for two years, in the hope of finding it.

"And more, he went to the home of the man he had slain, and kidnapped from her poor old grandfather, the child, who he knew would get the fortune that should have been her mother's."

Just then the old parson entered, and along with him Rose Ripley.

"Bill," he said earnestly, "this is my Wild Rose, and she will tell you how this man brought her here."

The scout arose and grasped the hand of the beautiful girl, while she said earnestly:

"I have just heard how much I owe to you, sir, for I have lived here for two years under a false impression.

"That man," and she pointed to Carter Creighton, "came to our house as our friend, and one day came when Grandfather Ripley was away hunting.

"He told me that Father Ripley had been called suddenly East, and that my father had left with a pard the map of a mine, and we were to hasten there at once and take possession, I doing so in my poor father's name.

"I did not doubt him, and went, for he said grandfather would soon come there, too.

"Month after month I have looked for him in vain, and Captain Don has shown me letters pretending to come from him, and stating that he was still detained on business.

"To keep others out of these mountains he has played ghost, having the men ride through the valley day and night, all robed in white, and on white horses, whose hoofs were muffled, to give back no sound.

"One of the men, Fanshaw, was scouting in the lower valley and saw some strangers there, who caught some trained animals we have, a superb horse by the name of Messenger, and a large dog we call Guide.

"These they lassoed one night, but they got away with their lassoes, and Fanshaw took them off, coiled them up, and left them on the trail to still keep up the ghostly idea.

"Captain Don has told me that he did all this to keep others away, who would rob us, and he trained Messenger and Guide, the horse and dog, to go to some ranch and back for provisions, and carrying letters—I think it was to the ranch of Bunco, the landlord of a tavern in Saw Dust City, though I am not sure.

"This is my story, sir, and though Captain Don has treated me well, I now know he has deceived me, and no power shall save him from punishment as the murderer of my parents," and the voice of the young girl fairly rung as she uttered the last words.

"And the murderer of mine?"

Through the recital of the story of Wild Rose, Carter Creighton had sat in his chair, his wounded arm resting upon the table by his side, silent, grim and with a cynical smile on his handsome face.

But at the last words, uttered by Clarice Creighton, who strode into the room, his lips parted in a cry, and he half arose, but sunk back into his seat, while he said:

"You, too, appear against me, Clarice?"

"Yes, and my testimony will hang you."

"You sought to kill me, Carter Creighton, that you might marry your cousin, the mother of that child you have so cruelly injured by slaying her parents; but I was picked up at sea by a vessel, and I returned home to know that you destroyed my parents, got their money, that was to have been mine, and squandered it.

"I set out to find you, and I did; but you saw me, knew thereby that I lived, had me kidnapped and brought here, though why you did not kill me I do not know."

"I really do not understand why I did not myself, Clarice, for I might have done so," was the cool reply.

"You did not, and so I shall live to see you hanged," was the cutting response.

He laughed mockingly, and then Buffalo Bill said:

"Toby!"

"Yes, sah."

"You have heard the charges against this man, so take him to another cabin with the prisoners, and I leave all to your keeping."

"I keep 'em safe, sah; dey don't git away from me, 'less death take 'em."

"I'll help, Toby," said Sol.

And with Reuben Minor also as an assistant the prisoners were led away, while the scout called to Hop Up and Lick Skillet to get a rousing good supper for all hands.

Thus several hours passed away, and then all retired for the night, Clarice Creighton going to the cabin with Rose whose bright nature made her as blithe as a lark.

The next day an "account of stock" was taken, and the "ghostly raiment" was first brought out, and next the gold-dust, which amounted to only a few thousand dollars all told, and half as much silver.

"This is your bonanza, Miss Rose, for your father's prospecting among these mountains found it," said Buffalo Bill.

"And where is yours?" asked the young girl, adding:

"All that has been done we owe to you."

"My bonanza does not happen to turn out in finding a gold-mine, but in finding you, Miss Rose, in releasing Mrs. Creighton and Sol from captivity, and in bringing the man who has so sinned against you all to justice.

"Could I ask for a greater bonanza than that, I ask you all?"

"It is a great satisfaction, sir, certainly, to feel all that you have done for us," said Clarice Creighton, feelingly, while Rose said quickly:

"Oh, I've got two bonanzas for you, and they are mine, as Captain Don gave them to me, and I will give them to you—they are Messenger and Guide."

And giving a call the superb white horse and the noble dog came quickly to her side, and she continued in her playful way:

"Messenger, I've given you away, and you, too, Guide, and grandpa says the one I give you to, saved you from the wolves, so you must be awful good to him; here he is."

And the scout caressed the Dumb Pards, who seemed to recognize him, for they were very docile in their nature toward him, while to others, excepting the Don and Rose, they were not particularly kind.

There were also at the camp arms of various kinds, and a score of horses, and, with their booty and their prisoners the party set off on their return.

That night they halted in the Crater Camp, and the next day, quite a cavalcade altogether, they started by easy marches for the fort.

It was upon their second day's journey, when crossing a stream that swept along at a terrific pace, that the led horses got entangled among those ridden by the prisoners, and one animal reared in the water violently, fell backward and plunged his rider beneath him.

A cry arose from every lip, for it was Carter Creighton who had thus disappeared beneath the flood.

An instant, and he arose, and seeing that he was being swept away, where no one could follow, Hop Up threw his rifle to his shoulder, as he said:

"Bad 'Melican man no hangee, no shall drown. So shootee."

He fired as he spoke, and Carter Creighton was seen to throw up his arms and sink from sight.

"He has cheated the hangman; but, Hop Up, never shoot a man who cannot hit back," said Buffalo Bill, sternly.

"No shootee, he drown; good people drown," was the reply of Hop Up.

No reply was made to this Chinese argument, and the party rode on in silence, all busy with their thoughts, and Clarice Creighton white-faced and stern-looking.

After awhile Rose said, softly:

"It is better so, for deeply as he has wronged us all, he is dead now, and it is over. We are avenged."

CHAPTER XLVII.

CONCLUSION.

FOLLOWING their different aims in life, kind reader, the characters of my story, in which I have tried to interest you, drifted away from each other after reaching the fort, where Buffalo Bill, as chief of scouts, and with the mystery of the Silver Circle solved, gained them a warm welcome.

Sergeant Nicodemus Toby received his pardon for deserting, his innocence was established by the paper of Reuben Minor, who confessed his guilt therein, and had then bid the party farewell, turning the head of his horse westward, and going off alone, none knew whither.

While regretting that Carter Creighton had not come on to the fort to be hanged, one of his men was recognized as a murderer, a deserter and a man who had escaped when under sentence of death, so he suffered the full penalty, while his comrades, against whom nothing could be proven, were set free, and they lost no time in leaving so dangerous a locality.

The night after their arrival at the fort Deer-Eye had ridden off alone, leaving a note for the scout that he was sorry to part thus, but that his life had been an unhappy one, and he meant to go far away to dwell where he was wholly unknown.

It was a sad letter for all, as Deer-Eye had won the great regard of all.

The Trapper Parson determined to set out at once for the East, along with Rose, to get for her the fortune she had inherited, and at their earnest entreaty Clarice Creighton went along as a governess for the young girl.

As for Sol, or Old Nick's Kid, he decided to turn guide and scout, so placed himself under the tuition of Buffalo Bill, who found in him a most promising pupil, and one who he felt assured would win fame in the future.

Nor was the scout mistaken, for he became famous as the Boy Guide.

Hop Up and Lick Skillet proved a bonanza for the fort, the former becoming the man-of-all-work for the commandant, while the latter was taken for the officers' mess, their names having been respectively changed to Whoop-em-Up-Johnny and Tea-Kettle Tommie.

As for Buffalo Bill, he still lives, and will live in song and story as a hero of the border as his late memorable career well assures.

THE END.

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